クロックワークプラネット
I
榎宮祐・暇奈椿
Illustration
茨乃
講談社ラノベ文庫

Clockwork Planet - Volume 01

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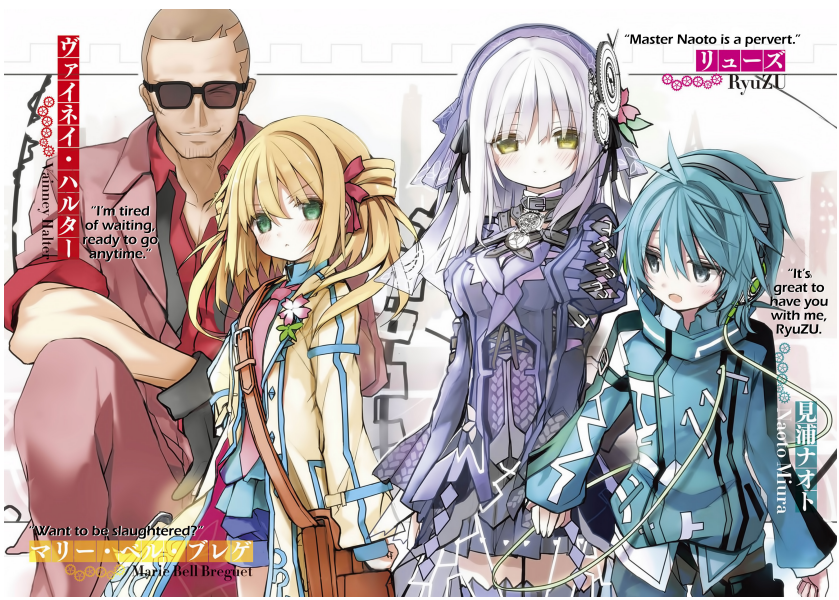
illustration 茨乃

"?"
Taken aback, Marie's movements as well as expressions froze in unison.
"_____"
Not wearing.
She wasn't wearing anything.
Or rather, she was naked
"I get it already. But can you please put on some underwear at least?


ヴァイネイ・ハルター
Vainney Halter
"I'm tired of waiting, ready to go anytime."
"Master Naoto is a pervert."
リューズ
RyuZU
"It's great to have you with me, RyuZU.
見浦ナオト
Naoto Miura
"Want to be slaughtered?"
マリー・ベル・ブレゲ
Marie Bell Breguet

Relative Mobility
"Mute Scream"
At that instant, everything Naoto knew of ended.

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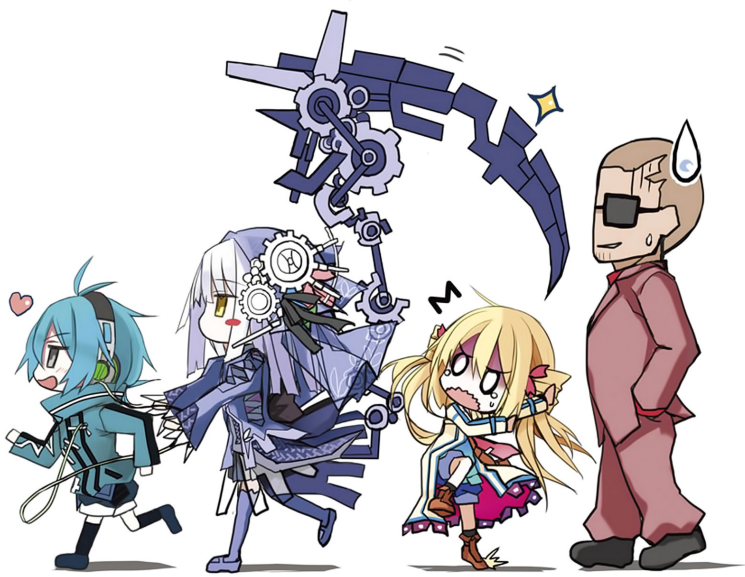

Prologue

—Tick tock, tick tock.

The gears continued to spin.

Regularly, mechanically, inevitably.

And so, they continued to count time as it existed.

Even as clocks stopped, it meant nothing.

Even when damaged, twisted, the wheel of time would continue to spin.

Regularly, mechanically, inevitably.

Tick tock, tick tock—

Prologue — Re-Construct

It was sudden.

But the world had long been destroyed.

Meteor Strikes, Invaders from Space, Pandemics, or the Armageddon—

Throughout history, humans have imagined all sorts of ways as to how ‘the world would end’.

And every single time, they would be overwhelmed by this delusion-like hysteria; but in the end, nothing happened. And then, they would worry about the fact nothing had happened, and the cycle would repeat itself once more, like a dog chasing its own tail in circles.

But reality was not so fictionalized to a point of drama.

There were no large meteors that crashed into Earth.

There were no aliens that came from the ends of the Milky Way to conquer the world.

No matter what kind of pandemic there was, it was ultimately defeated in the face of human medicine.

And also, humanity was not so foolish as to cause its own doom by using nuclear missiles.

The real ‘end of the world’ did not need any fantasy, nor any catharsis or romance.

This boring yet indisputable truth showed there was no need for such emotions to be involved in this end.

Let us talk about the ending here.

One day, the Earth suddenly died.

There was no anomaly, change or forewarning when it was announced.

Scientists concluded that the ‘lifespan’ was used up.

The Earth’s lifespan was estimated to have another 5 billion years left, but they actually miscalculated it by 5 billion.

It was really foolish.

All the people were dumbstruck, unable to say anything, but there was nothing they could do.

Besides, no matter how they calculated it correctly or wrongly, the hands of a clock would never turn back, and the lifespan of the Earth couldn’t be extended.

Earth was not an eternal lasting star, and it would not have a spectacular finale like an exploding supernova. Humanity would not meet its end from a calamity caused by the movement of the tectonics, which would cause a spectacle of panic in anticipation of it. Instead, the energy gathered in the planet was used up, and it slowed down for approximately a hundred years until it became a Death Planet…

Nothing changed during this time.

The boring reality continued.

The history of humanity ended at that point.

—now, let us talk about the boorish later developments.

Humans, having despaired over the Earth that was to become a death planet, built a large migration spaceship in their pursuit for a new world, and departed from the Solar System.

And like the previous Sci-Fi movies from not too long ago, the romantic story of wandering in space, searching for a planet similar to that of Earth, began.

They did not know where they were going, and there was no guarantee they could reach their destination. The outer space technology was incomplete, and there was a bigger probability that they would become space dust first.

Nobody knew what sort of end they would meet in the midst of this dangerous travel.

Bon voyage.

However, unlike the people who left for space, most of humanity chose to stay on Earth.

There were researchers who fought on, embodying the determination of humanity, but all brought about failed returns.

And just as a dead human could not revive, the planet could not be reborn.

There was still a hundred years until Earth would become a death planet, and as this planet headed for its death, humanity accepted this despair that was practically a noose around their necks.

To people, this time was too short for them to think of countermeasures, yet too long to maintain a sense of crisis.

The depleted resources and energy even prevented humanity from triggering a final war.

At this stage, reality did not show any signs of a fictional plot.

—However, 30 years after the planet died.

The overly boorish reality brought about a stage for a man.

He was not a scientist, nor a politician, nor a religious leader. Naturally, he was also not a magician who could randomly display a miracle at his own whim.

The reason why people would listen to that virtual unknown was probably due to despair—or maybe was it because they had already

given up on hope.

But after that, from the words he said, even the people in despair were flabbergasted by how ridiculous it sounded.

“I’ve invented a blueprint that can power all the functions of this world through gears.”

He was a clock engineer.

This man, who called himself “Y”, possessed a massive amount of data nobody else could have a grasp of, and declared to the entire world.

“Watch me now. I shall recreate the entire world with gears—”

On that day, reality surpassed imagination for the first time.

This was what he named the blueprint filled with countless gears:

—“Clockwork Planet”

●●●

He suddenly recovered.

Hey, are you feeling sane now? Are you completely certain on what you plan to do in the future? Okay, calm down and think it over again. Right now, there’s still time to turn back and look; don’t do such things all because of one foolhardy moment. Besides, what sort of benefit does it bring to you?

(Benefit…?)

In other words, return.

And 1000 years later…

Naoto Miura's desires, which matched the risks he took.

Naoto held his breath as he nestled between the water tank and the air conditioning installation at the top of a high-rise building, restraining his heart that was almost in a state of rampancy, and adjusted his breathing.

(This is—)

Was there a need to say so? It was all because of her.

Because that extremely cute person desired it. No, she did not know how she looked, but she was most definitely cute. That was why there was no problems; he definitely had to get her, to cuddle her tightly, to let her head rest on his knees while he patted it, to mess around her hair, to love her without holding back.

Right, he made up his mind. He would not panic, and he'd use his head, be a little cool, and not hold back. If anyone intended to stop him, he was going to break anyone that got in his way, even if it was the president.

He patted himself on the cheeks to motivate himself.

He affirmed the situation.

It was night, soon to be the next day.

The edge of the roof could not obstruct the view of the lights scattered along the streets, ostensibly a torrent of light that purified the darkness.

They were gears that converted energy into light, the light of the light gears.

Under that blanket of lights, the starry sky could not be seen.

What the naked eye could see were the silver moon and the ‘Equatorial Coil’ that operated under the influence of gravity.

“Now then…”

Naoto leaned his back on the wall in the shadows, and peered down at the street.

What could be seen below was the ‘Clockwork Town’—Akihabara.

A long time ago, it was a bustling area well known as the district for electronics, and at this point, still remained the capital of the most advanced environment.

There were anime, manga, games, and also gears, machine parts, and automated parts. It was a city of entertainment, with shops ranging from large to small, a hotbed of activity.

A memory flashed in his mind, reminding him that he once came to this place for a “Pilgrimage in the Holy Land”, and spent a lot at this place.

But at this point, he had no sentiments towards it.

For he had attained something more wonderful—and from now on, he shall continue to look for it.

“Right, it’s about time.”

After muttering this line, Naoto pulled his head in.

He picked up the cables scattered on the floor and attached them on the cheap neon green helmet on his head.

They were connected to an amplified mixer, an effects unit, a noise controller, and all sorts of audio equipment. Also, there were several microphones attached to them.

Naoto switched on the machine, and sat cross-legged.

With a deep buzzing, the machine started to run. He took in a deep

breath, and his chest beat wildly, thump thump, moving the hot blood through.

His ears were clear of distractions.

And he called out.

“—Marie, are you ready?”

“—Of course, who do you think I am?”

The answer came in the form of an elegant girl’s voice, and the uppity yet imperious voice, sounding as though it belonged to a noble, did not feel indisposed as it entered Naoto’s ears.

“It’s all up to you, Meister.”

“Of course. Please focus on your job here.”

Roger that, Naoto nodded.

And then he fiddled on the equipment, switched the microphone line, and said,

“—Halter, how’s it going on your end?”

“—I’m getting impatient here. Ready to go anytime.”

The deep yet charming masculine voice answered,

“But are you alright on your side? How do you feel? You’re the crux here, Naoto. It all depends on you.”

“It’s just a small thing. No problems.”

“Then let’s hurry and finish this. Once we go back, this old man will treat you to a meal.”

Naoto heard his brisk tone, together with some whistling, and gave a slight wry smile. The tension within him eased slightly because of this.

Then, Naoto switched the line again, and called out for the last person.

“—RyuZU, you ready?”

“—Master Naoto, please allow me to give you some beneficial advice. It is an act of a fool to ask about something you are already confident of. Your intellectual level is already shockingly low, so if I may ask of you, please at least try to act a little wiser when you act.”

The answer he got was of caustic sarcasm.

The words that would break a listener’s heart came from a composed girl—a spry voice that was akin to a music box.

Naoto smiled, and closed his eyes.

“I say, RyuZU.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“I love you.”

“—I think, as swine, it will be good if you die.”

“Phii～”

Naoto’s shoulders shuddered as he chuckled; the cute scolding felt good.

Ta ta ta, he tapped at the controls of the equipment lightly, and stood up.

“Okay, let’s play a song for a little while.”

Naoto faced the microphones lined at his feet,

“Let’s begin the countdown, shall we? Three, two, one—”

As he counted down, he raised his hands to the sky.

He looked down at Akihabara laid out below him, and like a conductor leading an orchestra, he caught on the rhythm he made in his ears and swung his right hand down forcefully.

Naoto kept his smile,

“—Start!”

●●●

Later.

There was an intense quake spanning a 30km radius with Akihabara Grids as the epicenter.

All communication functions ceased, and the “Resonance Gears” within started to function beyond their specifications.

The core towers of gear arrays, which regulated the functions of the city, started acting in a way never seen before.

This was neither an ordinary malfunction nor a sign of defect after years of wear and tear. The systems were running normally, but for some reason, it was not running according to its manager’s instructions.

And 5 minutes after it happened.

The communication functions, which had ceased for a while, suddenly started to work again.

The people, who were unable to do anything and watched the developments in silence, heard a ‘criminal statement’ through the television and radio from a ridiculously agitated criminal.

“Good evening, ladies—and—gentlemen!! And all foolish, mediocre and ordinary citizens who do not fit these categories!! Pardon me for disturbing your enjoyment of the weekend night!!”

The voice being broadcasted was doctored.

It was impossible to guess the age and gender of this voice, which paused the thoughts of its listeners.

“As for who I am—well, it is too embarrassing, so let’s cut it out! This bastard’s actually embarrassed! Let’s try again after raising the affection level, shall we? Well, in fact, I’ve been feeling sleepy for quite some time, I just want to drink a nice large cup of good night cocoa and sleep, but I can’t! Check it out!!”

The voice however ignored the reactions from the audience as it

continued its one-sided conversation like a drunken DJ.

“Ah, ah, does everyone know this? Since 1000 years ago, we’ve replicated the atmosphere, gravity, geothermal energy and other sorts of phenomenon through the usage of the gears—and then? If everyone’s mind is not filled with dog shit, I suppose you probably thought about a certain thing at least once—right!?”

—No way.

Amongst the crowd that had ceased its thoughts, the few perceptive people and the rare few who grasped the situation inadvertently gulped simultaneously.

An unbelievable, horrifying image appeared in their minds.

—Was it, was it, was it? How could such a stupid thing happen!?

And so the voice got more agitated, ostensibly betraying the insignificant prayers from the people.

“YE—AH!! To those of you who just thought ‘no way’! DING DING DING! You’re absolutely correct!! THAT’S THE UNBELIEVABLE FINAL ANSWER!!!”

—It was impossible.

But if that was the truth, this strange phenomenon could be stopped.

The communication functions that ceased at the same time, the resonance gears that reported the criminal’s intent, the city’s functions that were beyond Management’s control; all these pointed to a single conclusion.

The owner of the voice indicated an affirmation proudly and delightfully.

“ON THIS DAY! RIGHT NOW! FROM THIS MOMENT ON! I HAVE GAINED CONTROL OF ALL THE GEARS IN THE AKIHABARA

DISTRICT. YEAAHHHH—!”

—Currently, the planet is a replica made from gears.

The many gears, as many as the stars in the universe, compose a highly intricate mechanism that draws energy from the moon’s gravitational pull, and runs based on the Earth’s gravity.

But in this era, since the blueprints were lost, nobody was able to grasp the nature of the structure. Hundreds of the forefront leaders of clock engineers gathered together, yet they were only able to maintain it.

However.

The designer—commonly known as “Y”, did have perfect control over the structure.

“Y” was the greatest genius in human history.

But at the same time, he was simply just a man, neither a god nor a demon, and not a magician who wanted to do anything at his own whim. Thus, theoretically, it was completely possible for someone else to do the same thing.

Thus, anyone who had control over the gears could freely control the environment of the planet, and use this massive power.

In this world that was recreated completely through gears, that would be the ultimate power.

A power on the level of God.

“Okay! To celebrate the wonderful accomplishment on this day, I’ve prepared a wonderful gift for everyone! Don’t get so happy that you’ll piss your pants, yo!?”

Those that understood what was happening felt their blood curdle, and those that did not started to feel uneasy as they sensed a bad premonition.

Please, please don’t let this happen.

The voice however continued to notify them delightfully, ignoring this prayer from the people.

“Eh—the current time is February 8th, 00:12, 32 degrees Celsius. But does everyone know? Normally, at this time, the average temperature here is only around 5 degrees Celsius. Because of a malfunction in the recreation of the environment, everyone here is experiencing a hot sleepless night, and so!”

A fun, taunting voice echoed.

But the meaning it conveyed was a fatal one to everyone present.

“I will put an end to the harsh summer up till now. That means, 72 hours from now, I’m just going to lower the temperature surrounding Akihabara District to negative 150 degrees Celsius.”

Everyone was speechless.

What did the idiotic owner of this voice just say? Put an end to something? Negative 150 degree Celsius? Naturally, that would not be a state humans could live in.

Their words did not cease because of fear.

But that Akihabara would literally freeze.

“Ahh, no no, don’t thank me. You don’t have to get down on your knees to kowtow to me. I’m most grateful to see how everyone looks when they shriek and freeze to death.”

—Madness.

This was the only expression that could describe the somewhat delighted tone.

Such an eccentric madman had complete control over the temperature.

Every person felt chills over this terrifying reality.

“Oh shit! I forgot! I have to prove that this isn’t a bluff or a prank!!”

That voice was as nonchalant as one forgetting to turn off the power, and it continued like a bus tour guide:

“Then everyone, please look at Tokyo Tower from a window near you.”

And with that line, everyone lifted their eyes to a window.

The Tokyo Tower.

It was an old radio tower, made of a red and white steel frame.

After abandoning electricity, this territorial Tokyo landmark had become an obstacle and was preserved as a historical relic for more than 1000 years.

And then—

The change lasted only for a moment.

With everyone looking on, the red metal tower creaked in the night and was frozen white. It was as fast and absolute as soaking a rose in liquid nitrogen.

“Ahh—!!”

In the next moment the Tower was crushed by its own weight, became numerous bits of fragments, and collapsed without a trace.

Everyone was left speechless, and could only watch on blankly as the scraps fluttered.

—Was that which they saw just a while ago reality?

They had witnessed this in person, but their minds refused to accept it.

It was so surreal a scene that it could not have possibly happened.

…But reality was right before their eyes.

The tower, which had naturally stood for more than a thousand years, was no longer there.

Within a few seconds it had disappeared like an illusion.

“I wonder if everyone’s enjoyed this? That’s it for tonight’s show! Please take note not to catch a cold, and enjoy this night warmly. Good night! Thank you for listening in! See you again! Adios amigo!”

—The declaration made by the criminal ended just 10 minutes after it began.

The 40 million people living in the metropolitan area became a melting pot of chaos and within a few minutes the city’s functions were completely paralyzed.

●●●

On the roof of the building, Naoto was gasping for breath due to the highly intense speech he just made.

At this moment, a voice came from behind.

“—Yo, it’s been tough on you.”

He turned around.

Halter was standing there.

He was a bald hulking man, aptly described by the term ‘muscular freak’, and the way he silently walked over to Naoto with a grin on his face made him resemble a carnivorous Panthera.

“Now you’ve become an amazing internationally wanted terrorist—a superstar, right? How does it feel to be listed in the High School history textbooks?”

“Not bad.”

Naoto gave a light smile in response to Halter’s frivolous speech.

He did not feel agitated after committing a crime the world had never seen before and did not feel fearful for being an enemy to the entire world. What he simply felt was a sense of liberation after finishing a job.

Suddenly, a dazzling light shone on him.

“—Confirming target. All hands are to begin descent and capture the targets.”

Three helicopters were on the other side of the lights.

The armed helicopters were like black pterodactyls as they hovered silently, and shone their spotlights and machine guns at the two people on the roof.

Then, 6 groups—18 shadows in total, jumped out from the bellies of the helicopters. These gorilla-like silhouettes had pudgy arms and firm abs, and they landed on the cracked concrete floor one by one.

Halter patted his bald head and muttered:

“Three silent helicopters and fully armed assault-type Automatons. I guess that’s to be expected for a superstar; you sure have eager fans taking the initiative to approach you, huh?”

“If they want signatures, they need to get in line.”

In response to the duo chatting away frivolously, the helicopter’s speakers rang.

“Warning! Put your hands on your heads and get down! You’ll be shot if you resist!”

The 18 Automatons pointed their guns at them in unison with the warning.

In the face of this wordless pressure, Halter, who was breaking out with sweat on his forehead, whispered:

“Alright, what do we do? It’s embarrassing, isn’t it? I didn’t think they’d be so quick.”

“What do you mean by that…it’s over, isn’t it?”

Naoto however remained unmoved, and did not have any intention of getting up.

He was merely sighing away.

For—the situation was at its climax.

There was nothing else they could do, nor anything they should do.

Naoto understood this clearly.

“Isn’t that right, RyuZU?”

“—Right, the current situation has terminated.”

At that moment.

GTCH, the air got compressed, and the 3 helicopters’ propellers were blown off at the same time. They spun about due to the tail rotors running as they fell.

At the same time, all 18 Automatons ceased movements. Their heads dropped off, their arms were snapped, and their legs were severed—they were immediately turned into scrap metal, and after falling into bits, exploded.

Naoto covered his face to block the incoming winds and impact as he noticed something.

Before he knew it,

A girl was standing in front of him.

It was a beautiful girl dressed in a black archaic dress.

Her silver hair swayed in the middle of the storm as she gently lifted the hem of her short skirt.

Her snowy white skin was eyecatching even in the night. She had moist, red and plump lips, and her blazing eyes were like gold gemstones, reflecting the scene.

Once the storm subsided, she bowed to Naoto elegantly, and said:

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Master Naoto—also, have you not prepared your thanksgiving? I wonder if you do understand, but it is the master’s duty to quickly and effectively take action before I make my request.”

Naoto smiled and nodded.

“Thanks for saving me.”

“Is that all?”

“It’s great to have you around, RyuZU. You’re the best Automaton, RyuZU. I wouldn’t know what to do if you weren’t here, RyuZU. As expected of you, RyuZU.”

“…I can hear how overstretched those lines are, Master Naoto. That frigid taste and vulgar upbringing is clear for all to see, and though that’s simply sleazy rhetoric—there is no helping it. I shall accept it grudgingly.”

“You really are a tsundere, RyuZU.”

The next moment, Naoto was slammed into the concrete by RyuZU’s punch.

And as he glanced at this scene, Halter asked:

“Speaking of which, Missy, I remember the original plan was to have you be in charge of retrieval. What happened to Milady?”

“I abandoned her.”

“Abandoned…?”

“The enemy attacked 2 minutes and 37 seconds earlier than we expected, so I brought forth the plan and ensured Master Naoto’s safety first. It would have been troublesome if I had to save him after he were arrested.”

“Thanks very much for that, but what about the Princess?”

“No problems.”

—And so,

RyuZU took a step back.

A heavy gunshot rang, and a bullet passed through where RyuZU was standing just a while ago.

The shooter—was a white young girl standing on the roof in front of the emergency staircase.

Marie Bell Breguet.

“…That was dangerous, Princess.”

“Halter.”

The girl quickly approached as she greeted Halter, who was giving off cold sweat.

If she were to give a beaming smile and walk down the streets, countless men would definitely have fallen heads over heels for her. Her petite face, tall nose bridge, and fluttering light blond hair matched the uppity attitude.

But her emerald green eyes were burning with rage.

“Go catch that relic there. I must open her apart and create her personality structure today.”

Halter shrugged and sighed,

“Please don’t make me do something so impossible, Milady. How do you expect me to do that?”

“How else are you going to show off your real ability? Go catch that relic with that marine-style, close combat fighting skills or something—it’s fine if you break it though.”

“I’ve always been in the armed forces. Anyway, what’s going on?”

Marie did not answer as she swung the small gunblade—the Coil Spear in her right hand to the ground, and changed it into its blade form.

“THIS DAMNED RELIC—LEFT ME BEHIND AND RAN OFF JUST WHEN WE WERE SURROUNDED BY THE SECURITY AUTOMATONS!”

She roared with all her might as she swung the blade at RyuZU.

The sharp swing, combined with the momentum from the upper body, was easily dodged by RyuZU however as she lightly leapt to dodge it.

“Oh my, the plating has worn off.”

“YOU’RE TOO NOISY!”

“If it had been Miss Marie, who always proclaims herself to be a genius girl who can do everything, the mere disposable Automatons should not have been a problem, no matter if there were 10 or 20 of

them, am I correct?”

“HOW IN THE WORLD IS THAT POSSIBLE!? I NEARLY THOUGHT I WOULD DIE BACK THEN!!”

“Such—”

RyuZU widened her eyes in surprise.

“…I am sorry. Though I have tried my best to underestimate Miss Marie as much as I could, I never thought you would be such a perfect small fry…please allow me to express my deepest apologizes.”

“…I’ll rip you apart! I’ll definitely rip you apart…!”

Marie’s Coil Spear changed form, and just when she was about to deploy its blade…

“Quiet—”

Naoto was still sprawled on the concrete floor, muttering with a hushed voice.

The trio reacted to this voice, ceased their actions, and turned their stares silently at him.

Naoto placed his ear on the concrete roof, and continued:

“Those guys—are headed to the “Activation Bureau”, just as we had planned.”

Far, far away—

He simply pricked his ears,

And could perfectly hear the incoming footsteps—from the underground 5387m below them.

“3021 Automatons, and 1765 foot soldiers.

“…I guess that’s all the stationed troops they could immediately deploy.”

Halter scratched his head, and smiled in the face of this chance.

Marie kept her Coil Spear, and said,

“But our location has been confirmed, right?”

“From what I can hear from here, there are seven of them coming—not the silent helicopters though. They’re real Gatling assault helicopters—without any Automatons in them.”

“Those are the heavy arms helicopters Japan currently has that it can mobilize…the PTK-A74, huh?”

RyuZU asked:

“Do they possess a significant amount of threat?”

“These are independent unmanned assault helicopters with two Resonance Cannons on them…to put it this way, seven of them can turn this area into complete ash without resupply.”

“Alright, let’s go. Hey, Naoto, how much time do we have left?”

Halter asked.

Naoto then suddenly got up.

“They’ll arrive in—another 372 seconds.”

“Let us retreat before we meet any enemies then. I will carry the luggage.”

RyuZU stacked Naoto’s equipment together and raised it easily.

Naoto Miura, 16 years old, Male, Japanese.

A very ordinary High School student—but he, who had become the worst terrorist in history, had a unique talent.

That was—

Naoto pulled out the unnecessary cables from his headphones, and put his headphones on again.

He then switched on the Noise Canceller.

…Ahh.

He took a deep breath.

…It’s finally peaceful now.

Upon seeing Naoto like this, Marie asked softly,

“Hey, Naoto, are you alright?”

“…Hm, sorta.”

“You do feel some burden from that, after all…”

“No. It’s my fault…sorry.”

Then, Naoto gave a thumbs up behind him.

“It seems there’s a brothel in that building over there.”

“……Huh??”

“They’re always—~ yapping here and there, making a ruckus without reading the moo—”

Before Naoto could finish, he was punched by a blushing Marie in the chin.

His unique ability.

“Exceptional Hearing.”

He could hear everything accurately.

Whether it was an event happening in a distant building.

Whether it was the thousands of footsteps coming from more than 5km away.

Or whether it was the sound of gears biting into each other individually.

In a world constructed completely by gears, that was—

Halter stared at Marie, who was silently stomping on the back of Naoto’s head whilst the latter had collapsed.

“Forget about it, Milady. That brain juice will affect the world’s future.”

“The ways of this world are too crazy.”

“…Well, how exactly, does it sound absurd coming from you?”

Halter then stared at Naoto, groaning under Marie’s foot, and sighed:

“Let’s hurry up. It’s not the time for some small play.”

“…Ah, don’t worry, Halter.”

Naoto said as he staggered to his feet, patted off the dust on his clothes, and adjusted his headphones.

“As long as we work together, a metropolis with a population of 40 million will be in our hands.”

“…It’ll be great if that happens.”

The middle aged man, whose worrying nature did not match his physique, scratched his head as he said this.

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Naoto’s company ran down the stairs behind the emergency exit, and safely escaped from the building.

They passed the helicopters that had exploded upon landing, and ran to the rotary in front of the station.

The large monitor in front of the station was displaying an emergency broadcast, clearly reporting this unprecedented terrorist attack.

The High School Dropout, Naoto Miura.

The genius clock engineer, Marie Bell Breguet.

The ex-soldier bodyguard, Vainney Halter.

And—the mysterious Automata, RyuZU.

They had different nationalities and ages, and one of them was not human.

What sort of encounter had this gang, which had no common point between them, experienced?

Why did they end up being the most dangerous terrorists in history?

The motive behinds the actions.

The uninhibited ideals and arrogant desires.

Continued to surround the interlocked gears, the hidden mystery of the world.

Right, it all started from a month ago—

Chapter 1 – Coincidence (00:30)

Naoto Miura had no interest in anything but machinery.

He was a steadfast machinery maniac. No, a zealot, or one who was afflicted with a heavy reliance on machinery.

Ever since his childhood, he loved gears, engine cylinders, screws, springs, and wires. He truly loved the metallic glossiness and the ceramic touch. His heart would be at ease whenever he heard the ticking of a clock, and his heart would race whenever he heard the pin of the music box hit the metallic domes.

None of this changed at all even when he entered Middle School.

No, one could say that it actually got worse.

He never showed any interest whether it was manga, anime, or games. While his peers were creating ruckus over gravure pictures, he was simply concerned with tinkering with machines.

He was more interested in how automobiles worked than the debate between big breasts and flat chests.

He was more interested in the outlines of machineries than the sight of his female classmates in swimsuits.

He was more interested in documentaries regarding the development of the latest mainsprings than the borrowing and lending of adult videos.

At that point, he realized it.

—I see. So I guess I'm considered 'abnormal' after all.

But even though he had realized it himself, he would not have had to suffer this much if he could change the nature he was born with.

There's a saying that a person's personality is fixed since they're young, and Naoto Miura grew up to be how he was.

He had a twisted personality of devoting all his love into machinery, and it was completely futile to correct his personality.

Naoto Miura was already a lost cause.

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35° N, 135° E.

Grid Japan, first layer, Kyoto.

It was one of the few megacities in Japan, dubbed the millenium capital.

In this completely mechanized city, there were some wooden houses left as a part of the world's heritage, yet they did not fit into the modern city—this was the city Naoto Miura lived in.

At a corner of this megacity, barely on the edge of the urban area, there was a tattered apartment building tilting slightly to the side at a region—and there was a room on the right end of this 7-storey building most suited for a test of courage.

That was where Naoto's residence was.

"Ahh—today's a good day too!"

Naoto exclaimed as he climbed up the staircase that would seemingly collapse the next day.

He was a small boy dressed in black uniform.

The tack on his chest pocket indicated that he was still a First Year student. He had no special characteristics on his face, and he was wearing a pair of cheap neon green headphones on his ears, seeming pressing down his messy black hair.

His only distinguishing characteristic was his unique pale grey eyes, but this unique trait was overwhelmed by his savage expression, seemingly displaying his twisted personality.

"They blackmailed me, scammed me, made me their gofer, splashed water on me, and even scribbled on my table! What other forms of bullying have they not done to me!? Haha!"

Naoto let out a dry laugh forlornly.

—It had been a few years since he realized his abnormality.

But though he had known about it, he never reflected upon it, or rather, he took it in stride. He openly admitted his interests, told everyone about his character, and politely rejected a beautiful upperclassman girl, who confessed to such a boy like him for some reason, saying that she had no mechanical functions.

And this was the consequence.

Even when humanity had revolved their lives around gears, the bullying in school would not stop.

But this was simply a price he had to pay for lacking social awareness—though he had realized this. It was insufficient in easing the discomfort of his drenched uniform.

“Haa…goodness me. I’m back…”

He opened the door, its paint peeling off around, and entered his own house. However, nobody welcomed him.

Naoto had been living by himself.

Several years ago, his parents died one after another; he had no friends, no friends, and what was left to him was this dilapidated house—and the work tools his parents, third-rate mechanics, had used.

Naoto threw his bag into the bedroom, and walked down the corridor to the living room.

That was his workshop.

There was a pile of spare parts placed beside the door, and work equipment used for cutting spare parts at the wall. The air freshener used for sucking dust in was at the ceiling, letting out a quiet engine noise.

In the middle of this dim room was an operation table—no, a work table.

And lying on it was an automaton.

The model build was Japanese-styled, and the physique itself was of a young girl approximately 14 years old. The dull glass eyeballs were staring upwards listlessly, and one could see the wires and

strings dangling out, exposed from the openings all over the body.

“I’m back…”

Naoto said to the girl.

That was the automata Naoto built out of scrap parts.

In this era, the entire planet was driven by gears, and it was not a difficult skill to recreate the human body through spare parts.

During the spare time left between school and part-time work, he would rummage through the waste disposal plant and relentlessly gather every single gear and screw, experiment with the equipment and textbooks his parents left behind over and over again, and through the foundations of his repeated failures, barely managed to recreate it till this extent through the use of scraps.

This thing, which had barely taken form, was Naoto’s pride and joy.

“Then, I’ll take a bath to refresh myself, and then work hard later.”

He encouraged himself, and turned back on his heel.

Naoto then removed all his clothes, except for this headphones, and leisurely ventured towards the bathroom.

●●●

- Thud*

“Uhhaa–!”

Naoto let out a strange sound as he packed his body into the cramped bathtub.

He cautiously flipped the page of the latest issue of the ‘Automata Fan’ so as to prevent it from being soaked by the bath water.

“So the leg components of the Karasawa Heavy Industries are very mobile after all!! Ohh!? This is beautiful Double Gear Architecture!! Is Murakami Industry God!?”

The thing that captivated Naoto so much was a monthly magazine pertaining to Automata Hobbyists. It was a professional magazine detailing the latest technological trends in the industry.

To Naoto, this magazine was his beloved, on the same level as his pride and joy.

“I have to check out Kaiyou Hall for the latest technology after all. No-Sign isn’t too bad in terms of overall cost price though, I guess. Hm… as for springs, Damaz’s Rotary…”

Naoto flipped through the magazine excitedly, only to suddenly stop.

Listed on that page was a special collection of automata springs. It listed the specifications and prices for comparison, ranging from the now-defunct old famous types to the latest military parts.

Once he saw the second-hand price of the oldest part amongst them, Naoto could only sigh.

He scratched his head briskly,

“The problem’s still the spring after all. This is the only thing I can’t pick up from the waste disposal plant.”

The spring for an automata functions by itself as an energy generator that extracts energy from gravity; when it is abandoned, there is a need to recycle it in a specialized facility. Thus, unlike the other parts, it would not be thrown into the waste disposal plant.

“…I don’t have any money to obtain it legally…”

It took him a year to gather the spare parts from everywhere. It then took him two years of countless failures before he finally managed to piece the automata into shape.

He spent such a long time building the automata, but he was unable to take a step forward.

The issue was because he could not get the spring, and also because of Naoto himself.

Naoto often neglected his well-being due to his fanaticism with mechanics, but his technical ability was medicore.

—It was true that as an amateur, he did learn quite a bit. His hands

were nimble, and he certainly was in no way untalented.

But that was the limit.

Leaving aside the fact that he was unable purchase the orthodox spare parts to assemble it, he did not have any expertise or technical skills in re-assembling an automata through the use of faulty parts.

He did manage to study through the use of old textbooks, but the vocation of gear engineering was not so simple that an amateur could be fully self-taught in it. Even if he wanted to attend such speciality clock schools, he had no money.

Furthermore, there was still the issue of whether the patchwork of the automata could really move or not. It did not have any power, so he could not test its movements at all.

It can move, perhaps, probably, maybe, he thought.

This was the situation.

"…Well, money won't fall on me no matter how I complain."

Naoto sighed as he said so, and again focused his attention on the magazine.

—At that moment.

Through his earphones, his ears picked up on a foreign sound.

He lifted his head without thinking.

Obviously, there was nothing he could see other than the ceiling of the bathroom.

However, he clearly heard something rip through the space above. It was not a plane; something was closing in at an astounding speed —

BOOMM!!!

And so,

A boom that could have concussed him agitated his ears.

The bathroom and building shook, ostensibly lifted by the jolt. The magazine he inadvertently let go of plopped into the bathtub water —the ink quickly seeped away, and the magazine quickly blurred into a mosaic.

“Argh!! I haven’t finished reading it’—wait, now’s not the time for that! What was that!?”

After a instantaneous escape from reality, Naoto hurriedly leapt out of the bathtub.

A deafening noise and shock suddenly struck the apartment; it sounded as if an explosion or a building demolisher hammer had struck directly. Either that, or—

“A meteor…!? You gotta be kidding me!”

Naoto muttered to himself as he rushed out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around him.

What exactly happened?

Either way, he would have to check that the automata in the workshop was fine–

“ARGGGHHHWSEDRFTGYFUJIKOLP—!?”

He let out a scream that was beyond nonsensical.

The living and dining room at the end of the corridor was completely wrecked.

The ceiling was broken through, and a large amount of rubble and dust buried the room completely.

“Ho-How can… this be possible…!”

Naoto’s knees collapsed onto the floor as he let out an anguished cry, bawling away.

“What!? What is it!? What exactly did I do!?”

He did not know what was going on at all.

He wanted to enjoy a bath and read a magazine, but a meteor

crashed into his home, wrecking it. He really did not know what to say, but—

“Ri-Right—I got to see what’s going on!”

Naoto supported his limp body and forced himself to stand up.

Was it really a meteor?

Luckily, it seemed the living room was the only area hit. Perhaps the workshop further in might be fine.

“Ahh, seriously… damn, damn it! Imbecile!”

Naoto cursed out as he rushed to the scene of the wreckage, where the dust continued to permeate.

“Wha… what the!?”

With his tears and snot dangling, he peeled aside the pieces of rubble one by one.

“Haa, haa…!”

Naoto’s palm was bleeding, probably because he cut himself on something. While he was clearing the rubble, the floor was creaking.

He looked up, and found a large hole leading to the roof.

The floor was not broken through yet, but one had to wonder how long it could withstand the weight… perhaps there really was something that fell from the sky—

“Don’t tell me it really is a meteor…!? What did I do to trigger this kind of ridiculous development!?”

Naoto growled as he wiped the sweat off his forehead using his bleeding hand.

He wondered as he continued on.

What exactly caused this to happen?

If it was a human cause, he definitely had to make that person cry, apologize, and give compensation.

But if it was a real meteor… no, wait? It seemed a meteor could be worth lots of money. In this sense, it might be a blessing to him. He could live in a new apartment, and even buy a new spring—

As Naoto thought, there seemed to be something amidst the rubble, and he stopped as a result.

"…What, is this?"

Naoto stared at it, observing.

There was a large black box buried amidst the rubble—a container box.

Its texture and structure seemed to be different from that of a metal box, and it seemed like the only people who would use this would either be the 'military', or perhaps a certain research facility…?

But no matter what it was, it seemed there was something rather important hidden within.

"Well, it's not a meteor anyway. It's something valuable…right?"

One could tell simply by observing that it did not have the capability to withstand a fall from a great height—the container's frame was largely dented and there was an opening large enough for a human to enter through.

Naoto pondered for a while, and then concluded.

"…Right, I don't know what's inside it, but if it's something valuable, I'm going to use it as compensation and relief for my distress. Get ready!"

Naoto squeezed his body into the container gap and entered.

He stepped on the soft cushion material as he continued in, grumbling,

"If there's no treasure inside, you better be ready, you know? No matter where you drop from, I'm going to investigate and demand for an apology and compensation, whether it's through the judge or —"

However.

Naoto stopped talking once he saw what was inside the container.

No, he was not simply at a loss of words; his breath was taken away.

Perhaps his heart had ceased to beat.

That was the extent of shock he felt.

It was a *coffin*.

That was what Naoto thought, at least.

It was a *coffin* made of glass, filled with wondrous technology that resembled an intricate mechanical clockwork movement…

A girl was sleeping within it.

She was buried amidst the flowers of mechanical parts—screws, engine cylinders, wires, springs, gears, sleeping silently.

She seemed to be in her teens; she had flowing silver hair and a tender face. Though she was dressed in a simple, elegant black dress, that slender, pixie-like body could be imagined in his mind.

Naoto was left speechless.

Or rather, any critic, no matter how scathing they might be, would be left speechless.

A certain 'ultimate' form was right in front of him, able to instantly captivate the viewers' heart. That beauty was not something that could be limited by the terms, pretty or cute; it had already encompassed all forms of beauty in the world.

…Right, it was…

The Clockwork doll, Automata, the 'ultimate' form…!

Once Naoto had realized this, he was in the midst of his ecstasy.

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It was a ‘port’.

Several large stripes of steel laid below the black night sky .

Those were trestle bridges.

The 3500m runway was spinning counterclockwise against the massive gear of Grid Osaka’s, which was spinning slowly.

—Kansai International Airport.

It was an international interchange that was used long before this planet was covered in gears, full of history.

Though it had a history of more than 1000 years, the construct itself was refurbished a few years ago. The gears could be heard spinning everywhere, clear as crisp.

Amongst them, there was a large transport carrier at a corner of this harbor floating in mid-air, the 7th cloister, a runway that was not open to the public.

The work machines would enter from the opened hatch by the side, and containers with paint markings on them were transported out in an orderly manner, under the supervision of a massive number of workers.

The containers that passed through the runway would be sent to the storage in the 7th terminal area. They would then be loaded onto the trucks and sent to the pistons at all the hazard areas and back.

…Though that should have been the procedure.

“It fell, you say?”

The location, the reception room in the 7th terminal.

A girl dressed in deep blue shirt and beige summer coat-like haori turned her head around and asked skeptically.

“Well… it seems, there’s some sort of a problem…”

“I can tell.”

The girl sounded aloof as she swayed the light blond hair on her neck. She glared at the man sharply, prompting the latter to continue.

And in response, the man averted the girl’s stare throughout this conversation by lowering her head.

As he continued to fidget timidly, his image as the freight manager and the posh looking suit were already disintegrated.

“You just said that a container dropped. I’m having a little difficulty understanding this, what is that about?”

Was it a machine failure or a human error? No matter what, this certainly was a fault on the port’s side, especially since there was delicate machinery packed in a special casing. Even if it fell off during transport, there would not be any major issues.

“Was it an accident involving with workers on site?”

“No, that’s not it. The loading was fine, and the remaining containers were all shipped within an hour.”

It got more and more confusing.

Where exactly was the problem then?

The freight manager stuffed his sweaty handkerchief into his clutches, looking troubled as he stared at the girl.

“The accident I’m talking about happened in mid-flight, not during takeoff or landing.”

The girl remained silent as she watched the freight manager.

In response, the man could only say sheepishly, probably due to the pressure from the girl’s stare or her petite size that was probably a third of his.

“Well, it-it was a sudden request. There was a lapse in the loading work, so we forgot to fasten one of the containers…”

“So it fell out in mid-flight?”

“I-I’m really sorry about this…this is the first such incident ever

since our airport began operations. We do admit that we spent quite a lot of time on this, and there was a delay in the report."

"What's the container that dropped off."

The girl asked with a sharp, cool tone.

And the freight manager was ostensibly gasping,

"…The YD-01 Container."

"__"

"I-I'm really sorry about that!"

He lowered his head further, but the girl did not pay any attention to him.

"…This is what you were trying to tell me, no?"

The girl spoke, her voice ostensibly rising from the depths of hell itself.

"A large carrier making an emergency flight has important personnel and materials on board, and for some reason, the hatch opened itself. One of the 3558 containers was not fastened due to carelessness, and it so happened to be the most important, precious one, 'that' irreplaceable container?"

"Yes…"

"If this is some sort of Japanese-styled joke, I really can't laugh at that."

"I-I'm really so…"

The man had apologized for the umpteenth time, and he peered at the girl, wanting to see her reaction.

Her stoic face remained emotionless as she stared back.

At this point, the freight manager was feeling no different from a death convict facing his own hanging.

In fact, the situation was quite similar to this metaphor. It was

beyond the state of settlement through apology and compensation; it would be a major relief itself if he were simply fired, but from how the girl looked, perhaps the company would have to fold—perhaps?

The girls smiled as brightly as that as a blooming flower.

Her gentle green eyes showed a boyish look, her thin pink lips curling in joy.

—And a complete change occurred.

The girl turned sharply, slamming her suitcase into the man's face.

His nose was broken, blood splattered.

She looked down at the man who squealed like a slaughtered pig, writhing in agony, her eyes blazing with rage.

She then spat:

"You're useless at work, your excuses are foolish, your jokes are weak—looks like the hardworking and capable Japaneses are a thing of the past. Now I understand completely—Halter!"

Upon hearing the voice call for him, a bald man, who had been on standby in a corner of the room, slowly got up. He was over 2m tall, his muscular frame practically suited within a deep grey suit, and clearly, he looked the part of a professional killer or a terrorist no matter how it looked.

He spoke mildly.

"Meister Marie—I do think that it is uncourteous to raise your voice like that. Also, violence is never a good thing."

Upon hearing this, the girl called 'Meister Marie' snorted, and snobbishly retorted:

"Halter, who hired these useless folks?"

The man questioned, Halter, stared at the sobbing freight manager in pity.

"No, their performance history has been very exceptional, and I do

remember the whole team of staff performing well, very experienced in their work. The problem here, I think, should be the overly packed schedule?"

"So what? Are we going to just excuse an unprecedented, unexpected failure of the latest transport carrier dropping a cargo with 'we were too busy'?"

The girl took out a 'Chrono Compass' from her chest pocket, saw the time on it, and sighed. It was a really intricate timepiece, a symbol of a 'First Rate Clock Technician (Meister).

"—But it's true that we really don't have much time. Ahh, my sugar levels…"

The girl took out colorful pop candies, and started licking them, commanding with an unhappy look.

"Send for a reclamation team immediately. We need to confirm that the contents inside is unscathed, let alone the box. Ensure that she is taken back no matter what."

"Understood."

Halter bowed like a butler, and started using the telecommunication device inside the reception room.

The girl glanced at Halter sidelong, and went off to the lobby.

"…It's true that we don't have time."

In the current world, cities were built upon gears.

As the gears continued to move, there was a limit as to how far they could transport things even if they were moving goods from one city to a neighboring one. The only ways were a 'Cylinder Tunnel' and the air route.

The construct of the 'Cylinder Tunnel' meant that they could not change directions freely, and due to the distance, an air delivery would be the only choice—

102 Technicians.

500 Automatas.

And 3558 Containers.

Even the girl felt that it was a little too tough delivering such a large batch of goods from Canada to Japan within a day.

However—

“Even if that’s the case, there has to be some limit to the kind of mistake made, right…!?”

Once she arrived at the entrance lobby, she found that the team team had already gathered there with their luggage in tow. Technicians of different genders, ages and race immediately stood still the moment they saw the girl.

They were looking at her, remaining still, but the girl showed no signs of timidity as she calmly asked,

“Is everyone ready?”

“Of course, Meister Marie.”

The man in his 50s, the mechanic officer, stood as their representative, and nodded. The girl then said to him:

“The unloading will be done in an hour. While all these are transported to the Core Tower in Kyoto, please unseal all the containers required for our work.”

“Leave it to us.”

“I will head directly to the scene once the work at the administrative bureau is done. We’ll begin work tomorrow, local time 06000. Before then, all automatas must have their springs installed, and the work teams will be left to each leader, understand?”

“Roger that.”

The staff members bowed politely to the young girl once she clearly stated her instructions.

The girl watched her team get ready to work, and sighed as she stood in the middle of the lobby.

Why was it that things were not proceeding smoothly this time?

It had been unprecedented, whether it was the short preparation time or the accident in the midst of transport.

"…I have a bad feeling about this."

Let's just hope I'm worrying too much. The girl muttered to herself.

At this moment:

"Pardon me, but are you Professor Marie Bell Breguet of the 'Meister Guild'?"

A voice could be heard from behind, and the girl Marie turned back.

There were probably 10 men standing down there, dressed in black suits like they were at a funeral, smartly dressed in uninteresting ties.

Feeling repulsed by the fake smiles they showed, Marie spat dangerously:

"I don't like people calling me by my full name."

"My apologies then, Professor Breguet. It is an honor to meet you."

The men maintained their smiles, and continued.

"We're from the 'military', representing Grid Kyoto. Welcome."

"I'm sorry that we were unable to arrange for living facilities on our side due to the abruptness of this situation. We have arranged a room for you in the Central Hotel, so if you don't mind, Professor, please…"

"No need for that."

Marie interrupted the men, and spoke.

"I'm grateful that you spent so much effort in this, but I have to hurry to the scene immediately and establish the restoration plans."

"Is that so… however Professor Breguet, where do you plan to stay?"

"My staff would be sleeping there with just a blanket over them. I too will be at the scene like them."

"But as the princess of the Breguet family…"

“We’re not here for sightseeing.”

I have nothing to say. With this attitude, Marie ignored the worried men as she turned towards the entrance.

The men hurriedly followed her.

“Please wait, Professor Breguet. We hope that you would at least rest in the hotel tonight. There’s a banquet arranged for tonight.”

“I don’t have the time.”

Marie marched on without looking back.

A man amongst the pack tried to argue back, saying:

“Professor Breguet, you don’t have to be so impatient.”

“Yes. Currently, Kyoto is undergoing maintenance with 1,400 technicians, more than 10,000 automatas available. There are no issues with safety.”

“Of course, we have instructed for them to follow your instructions during the work—”

“There’s no need for them.”

Marie turned back, speaking nonchalantly.

“Just leave the work to my team. Soon afterwards, I’ll send a representative to obtain the map data from you.”

“Y-Yes… but Kyoto is currently under the control of the ‘military’. I humbly do not think that nobody would be earlier on the city functions than us.”

“The city adjustments require an intricate amount of cooperative work. The work will not proceed smoothly if the technicians are not in sync.”

“Pardon me, Professor Breguet, but they are considered top notch in our country…”

“—I guess it’s to be expected of a country with the worst sense of jokes. Well, I guess I you won’t understand until I spell it out.”

And so, Marie showed a gentle smile.

“All the untrained amateurs will get in my way if they’re involved. This is what I’m trying to say.”

“This…”

These vicious words from Marie stumped the men. She taunted them with an icy stare, and sneered:

“Do you want me to tell you what you’re really thinking? This is the ‘military’s area, we’re watching over you, so don’t you dare try anything funny. That’s what you’re trying to say, right?”

“Su-Surely not? We definitely have no such…”

“Even if a drop of wine falls into mud, mud is still mud. But if a bit of mud is mixed into the wine, there’s no way to drink it.”

“…”

“There’s only one request I’m asking of you. Just keep your mouths shut and wait on the sidelines. You definitely can do that, right?”

After that, Marie turned to leave without anticipating the men’s responses, passing through the entrance gate.

There was an obsidian-like exquisite sedan parked at the rotary in front of the airport’s gate, and Halter, who made his move first, was waiting for her.

Marie handed the heavy luggage to Halter, and sat in the car.

Halter then got into the driver seat. Marie fastened her seatbelt, and said:

“Let’s go.”

“Understood.”

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“—Going as planned.”

One of the black suited men said as they watched the sedan leave.

Interestingly, there was no sign of rage or dissatisfaction even after they were mocked by such a young lady. They were smiling, ostensibly relieved.

One of them grinned, and said,

“Luckily, she’s a haughty princess, just as the rumors have stated. She’s easy to manipulate.”

“Then, let us have her work for us.”

They showed sinister smiles, sneering at the words the girl had just mocked them for.

They were the only ones who heard these words.

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“Ahh—I’m so tired.”

On the moving car.

Marie slumped into the seat like a deflated balloon.

Halter witnessed this through his rear-view mirror, and grimaced.

“It’s been tough on you.”

“Tough? My foot! I’m being watched by hyenas no matter where I go! You gotta be kidding me!”

She answered immaturely as she took off her summer coat and her boots. Then, she took a bar of chocolate from her bag pocket, and gnawed on it.

“Nobody, even the ‘Meister Guild’ or the Japanese government can do any preparations beforehand. I’m just a clock technician, why do I have to deal with the local organization?”

Marie fussed as she rolled about on the back seat, clearly abandoning all aspects of a insufferable princess who commanded the older men.

She was already in her arrogant and rotten girl mode.

Halter killed off the urge to laugh at such a huge difference, and reproved her.

“Well, Milady, please don’t forget your etiquette as a fine lady even if you’re in the car.”

“Leave me alone.”

“It’s my job anyway. See? The hem of your shirt is crumpled.”

“So? What? You wanna see?”

“I have no interest in brats. Maybe in another 10 years.”

“Die.”

Marie sent a kick into the back of the driver seat.

Halter nearly hit the steering wheel in the front, and laughed, saying:

“The brats at the Academy would faint with faint of happiness if they saw it.”

“Like I care about them. Who do you think I am?”

Well, of course. Halter broke a chuckle.

Ahem. He cleared his throat, and answered.

“You’re the famous, unprecedented beautiful Professor Bregeut who graduated as the valedictorian from many famous universities. During your studies, at the youngest age of 13, you managed to become a first-class clock technician, a Meister, the apex of 200 million clock technicians in the world. I, Halter, am really delighted to be your secretary—”

“That’s disgusting, just shut up!”

Marie wailed, and Halter stopped talking as he snickered away.

He gently stared at the girl, now puffing her cheeks, and continued,

“Please, Milady, do not go about making enemies.”

“What? Is that a lecture?”

“It is an advice. I do understand that you are very impatient about such things, but they are still important gears that create this society even if they are like that. We will not benefit in any way if they suffer and hate us.”

“I believe I’m already courteous with them already, no? If it were ‘big sister’, they would probably have vanished with their company.”

“There’s no need to compare yourself with that otherworldly…”

“Speaking of which, what else can those amateurs do?”

“—Yeah, they can’t do anything, nothing.”

This was the terrifying part, but this girl had yet to realize it.

Even though she had the highest level of talent in the world, she was still immature. Halter lowered his eyebrows.

“…Well, in fact,, there’s something funny going on.”

Marie continued to lean on the seat, enjoying her chocolate as she tilted her head.

“Though we sent them off because they’re too annoying, why are we rushing so much when there’s a ‘military’ base nearby?”

“Hm…? Speaking of which, what’s the reason they sent us in?”

“It’s just a common gravity problem. They said that there’s an error with the Core Tower, that the gravity can’t be reset to the normal values or something like that. The value has increased by 1% or so.”

“That’s really weird. A simple maintenance will be enough to settle that level of level.”

“Seriously. There’s no need to get everyone here on such short notice from Canada; why did they even call me here ‘just in case anything happens’?”

“The ‘military’ technicians however aren’t on our level of technical expertise let alone numbers. Had the Japanese Government not sent a request to the ‘Meister Guild’, they probably would be worried about being unable to deal with such responsibility if a mishap happened, perhaps?”

“It’s always politics, politics, politics everywhere… it’s unforgivable that my vacation’s in smokes just to save those geezers faces. Ahh, I miss Paris’ Absinthe…”

“That’s not something a young pretty girl should be drinking.”

“You’re annoying.”

“Yes yes—we’re going to the administrative bureau first, right?”

Halter asked, and Marie nodded as she gnawed on the chocolate.

“Ah—yes please. I plan to rest after finishing the procedures and the plans. Call me immediately no matter what if you find her.”

“Understood.”

She could see the center of this city from the car window. The Core Tower, standing tall into the clouds, would be her temporary workplace from the next day onwards. She lifted head, and saw that the ‘Equator Spring’, which seemingly split the sky into two, was spinning as usual.

This world was built through the use of a countless number of gears covering it.

And the one providing all the momentum was the ‘Equator Spring’, which created a massive amount of energy through the Moon’s gravitational pull.

—The Clockwork Planet.

A mechanical world that had its wind, temperature, weather and even gravity controlled by gears.

The dried seas, dead lands were chiselled into gears along with the entire crust.

Currently, there was nothing under those large gears.

The Earth had already become an empty husk floating in space.

It was a scenario that had continued since 1000 years ago.

But for this world that was no different from a very precise mechanical clock, regular maintenance was needed to ensure normal operations.

Any form of machinery could not continue running forever.

They would break down, age, depreciate, and finally cease to run.

Thus, there was a need to interfere and realign the gear mechanisms of the planet.

This would be Marie Bell Breguet's job.

"I really… want some Absinthe."

Marie indulged herself in the Bohemian atmosphere as she stared blankly at the scenery moving outside the window.

●●●

Naoto slowly approached the 'coffin' that was before him.

"I don't know when the floor's going to collapse. Got to move this thing away quickly…"

He had cold sweat upon him once he heard the floor creak on the slightest movement.

He twiddled with the 'coffin', looking for any openings. After searching, he did not find any holes or sorts. It did not seem to be a type that required a key, but there were many movable parts. Was it something like a puzzle…?

"Hm… over here? No, doesn't fit. This one? Eh, what a waste of time—"

Click!

There seemed to be something meshing together at his hands, and the heavy springs inside the 'coffin' jumped. After that, the sound of gears spinning could be heard, and a white steam shot from the gap in the installation.

"Great, it's open!"

He slowly opened the lid, released the belts fastening the girl down, pulled out the cables that were of unknown purposes, and pulled the girl out from the 'coffin.

—She's light.

That was the first thought he had.

This weight would not be unnatural for an ordinary girl, but she

was very light for a full-sized automata. It was possible if she was an automata used for sex, but it would be hard to image such a high quality thing being simply used as a toy. No, however, what was with the softness of the skin? Which manufacturer made such skin quality?

“No, now’s not the time to think about this. If I don’t hurry…”

Naoto stumbled about as he carried the girl, spending quite some effort pulling her out from the container.

When looking out from this forcefully reformed open-aired living room, he could see the silhouette of the ‘equator spring’ driving this world behind the starry sky.

This building was practically a wasteland, and was afflicted by an impact equivalent to a meteor fall.

If he were to dawdle on, perhaps the floor would really collapse…?

Naoto calmly looked around to assess the situation, and at this moment, he found some sort of seal on the neck of the girl he was carrying.

—’Y, ‘RyuZU’.’

“…RyuZU? Is this her name?”

Of course, nobody would respond, but it probably was correct.

Naoto again wondered how to deal with this ‘ultimate automata’ ‘RyuZU—the first thing he needed to do was to ensure he had the necessary tools.

He pushed the rubble and went off to the workshop.

Luckily for him, the workshop did not seem to be really damaged.

He pushed the door aside, went inside, and found parts and tools scattered everywhere.

He carefully made sure not to let his bare feet step on them as he went towards the middle of the room, the work table.

He stared at the automata he had yet to complete—

He then made up his mind, and moved the incomplete automata

from the work table to the hangar, putting RyuZU onto the table instead.

In the meantime, the building creaked and trembled, ostensibly giving off a warning.

He touched RyuZU's neck, pricked his ears, and listened carefully.

"…The spring's still moving, but nothing else is moving. Is it really broken after all?"

If that were the case, he could only repair it here.

He could not bring all the necessary tools, and even a miniscule amount of dust would cause an anomaly in the extremely small gears used on the automata.

He pondered over and over again, and made up his mind.

He decided that he would finish the repairs before the building collapse, and escape then.

"—Okay!"

He slapped his cheeks to motivate himself.

He put on his work clothes, took down the waist bag dangling on the wall, strapped it on his waist, readied the soft light on the work table, and switched it on.

The preparations were complete.

He carried the girl, and pulled down the fastener on the back.

He removed her dress like a person removing the wrapping of a present, and found the back profile of the girl's white tender shoulders in front of him…

Naoto began to work in the midst of the wasteland-like building that was in danger of collapsing anything.

He turned RyuZU over, moved his fingers along the shoulder blades. There seemed to be something hard beneath the soft skin. He pressed it slightly, and it made a click as her back opened down the middle like blooming flowers.

"…Wah!"

The intricate functions were shown beneath the opened skin, causing him to feel that the entire universe was encompassed within.

Naoto gulped.

He really wanted to study the parts completely if not for the current situation. He shook his head and moved the extremely small tool into RyuZU's back.

—If his actions were to be seen by a certain Meister, there would be an outcry, for sure.

Naoto's methods were way too clumsy as compared to the complexity in RyuZU's construct.

He was fumbling here and there due to his confusion and frustrations, but was able to accurately pinpoint the correct position for some reason. However, he had to retry over and over again due to choosing the wrong tool.

First, he had never used a measuring instrument, let alone a map.

A humanoid automata made completely of gears was a collection of millions of intricate parts. To repair a tiny gear without a map, one would need a pricey instrument meant for pinpointing the fault.

That should be the case, but Naoto was searching through the infrequent use of his hearing.

And there had yet to be a mistake. It was as if he did not need to check, but that he already knew where the fault was…

"—Is it here?"

Right, Naoto definitely knew where the fault laid.

For he simply needed to hear.

It was as if there was a melodica blown by a kindergartener in the midst of an orchestra larger than the Vienna Philharmonic.

There was a stain in this perfect masterpiece.

How could anyone stand the presence of such a disturbance?

A perfect design, product, was imperfect because it could not move,

and in summary, right—it was frustrating. That was what Naoto thought.

However, the problem…

“What’s this part anyway…?”

Naoto’s knowledge and expertises were insufficient for him to understand this.

He had no idea what this part was, or why it broke.

In the end, he could only hear and slowly try to adjust the countless number of keyholes one by one.

If his hand accidentally slipped, he could slice the mock nerves that were thinner than spider threads, or he could end up tilting the nanosized gears. Once the Main Cylinder was damaged, it would be unsalvageable.

It was a risky challenge of utmost danger.

…And Naoto spent 3 full hours doing this dangerous repair job.

●●●

“—Haa…!”

3 hours passed.

It was a harrowing 3 hours where his body, and probably his soul were grinded.

Naoto’s mind and endurance was depleted, his breathing erratic.

“Thi-this should be repaired now… I guess?”

He had confidence, but he thought uneasily.

His ears were telling him it was fine, but he had never checked the construct itself.

At this point, a sense of regret rose in him.

Should an amateur like him have tinkered around with this supreme machinery? If it were to fail, he would have committed an irredeemable crime.

Naoto felt fear creep into him the moment he thought this, and shook his head.

“…No, it’ll activate again once I spin the spring again… I think.”

Naoto reached his hand tentatively for the girl’s nape—the spring hidden under the silver hair, and calmly started to spin it.

However, the building did not look to be in good condition. The ceiling had been shaking for quite a while, and new cracks were forming on it as tiny fragments were peeling off and dropping.

“…Haa… haa….”

He spun the spring round after round, gathering elastic energy to activate it.

But no matter how much he spun it, he could not feel anything.

A throbbing regret rose from his gut, and bounded him tightly.

No way, no way no way! Did I really fail?

“—Damn… you gotta be kidding me!”

Pshh—

He heard a fatal sound.

He did not see it, and in fact, he did not want to know the details.

Even so, Naoto’s ears could conclude through the headphones.

The building was starting to collapse.

“Ah, da…”

He looked up.

The ceiling just so happened to collapse, falling right at Naoto—and RyuZU.

But at the same time, he felt a slight touch on his hand.

At that instant.

—RyuZU jumped up from the work table without any foreboding.

She was at immediate top gear.

The girl embraced Naoto with such a fluid motion, it was impossible to see her activating.

The leg actuators were spinning at full speed, and the accel gears were spinning rapidly as RyuZU shot out of the window beside her, with Naoto in her embrace, like a cannon.

All this happened in mere milliseconds before the ceiling collapsed.

“Uh, wahh…”

They were falling.

Inertia had captured the duo.

The 7th level of the apartments was approximately 20m tall, and an ordinary automata would not be able to land safely from this height. It would definitely be wrecked, and Naoto would land directly on the ground… however, the automata girl carrying Naoto showed elegance and smile—and poise.

Naoto stared at her sidelong expression.

It was a short moment of several seconds, but it felt dozens of times longer than that.

The moment they were close to the ground, the girl suddenly moved her legs and changed her position, agilely spinning around.

They landed.

“—!!”

A heavy thud could be heard.

But the impact did not reach Naoto at all.

How potent are the shock removers in this automata? Are the leg constructs wrecked? Ahh, is the artificial skin damaged by the glass–?

“…”

RyuZU wordlessly let go of him, and he left the girl’s clutches as he landed.

And so, he fell without managing to stand straight.

His mind was completely blank, and he could not think properly at her. He merely stared blankly at the girl in front of him.

“Y—”

The girl’s dazzling topaz eyes were staring at Naoto with a mysterious glint.

And he could only blink blankly at her.

The breath from the slightly opened mouth was shaking the air.

“Yo—u—”

The vocal generator started to shake, and there was some noise mixed with the voice.

Was there an error because it was not activated for a long time? The girl reached her hand for the neck, lifted her eyes to the sky, and adjusted her vocal generator.

Soon after, she slowly lowered her arms, looking satisfied as she nodded.

After adjusting herself and her clothes.

She stood still, ostensibly reverting back to the perfect state she always was in for hundreds of years.

The girl briefly looked around to check the surroundings, and again stared at her feet.

“Are you perhaps the one who repaired me?”

It was a delightful voice, ostensibly played by a music box.

The mercury-colored girl was slender and lovely, wearing a dress that was ostensibly woven from the night itself.

A pair of dazzling golden eyes, ostensibly made of precious stones, stared at the speechless person in front of her.

“—Ahh, after one such silly malfunction, I was forced to suspend functions for 1,804,926 hours, and yet humanity’s intelligence still remained at a level no better than that of a flea? I sense neither intelligence nor grace, but are you perhaps the first graduate from that level.”

If he were to listen closely, he could slightly hear an inorganic audio driver.

But that rhythm was overlapping with the inadvertent high-pitched throbbing of his head.

“…Goodness. Humanity’s foolishness knows no boundaries. If possible, I sincerely wish that My Master is at least a superior being to that of an insect.”

Her words were scathing, but she still reached her hand out to Naoto elegantly.

Her expression was gentle, in stark contrast to her spiteful words, and a smile lingered on her lips.

Naoto too smiled back, reached his hand out, and gave a thumbs up with all his might.

And at that instant, he lost consciousness.

Chapter 2 – Complication (03:18)

3.18am, 24 seconds.

Marie Bell Breguet woke up.

She kicked the blanket and leapt up.

She was in the middle of this dark small room, probably used to keep books inside, and held her breath as she listened in on her surroundings.

(That was…)

She felt mysteriously uneasy for some reason.

She was already in a deep slumber due to the fatigue from the long journey, only to wake up out of a sudden. The heart in her left chest was throbbing violently.

Her feet slowly left her temporary bed, and touched the floor.

There was silence everywhere.

And there were still a few hours till dawn.

The staff were resting their bodies and minds for the arduous task that would await them. The ones who have yet to sleep were probably the night shift workers who were in charge of supervision. Marie too was allured by the urge to snuggle under the blanket again…but held herself back.

She could not leave that strange feeling back then as it was.

She was a genius, and also a Meister.

Ever since her childhood, she had been practically entered different locations every single scene, and detected countless numbers of anomalies and dangers.

The talent and experience was warning her. In this situation, she was able to gain such a feeling because of those factors.

That was why it was impossible to say that nothing happened.

“Who’s there!?”

Marie yelled as she hurriedly got up.

She put on her coat, trudged her heavy feet, and pushed the door aside.

She exited onto the dim corridor, and there was something moving slightly beside the door. It was a bald middle-aged man with a hulking bear-like body, but his existence felt frighteningly nonexistent.

He, Halter, was lying on the floor under a blanket, and slowly lifted his head.

“…What is it, Milady? You dreamt of something scary?”

“You wanna die?”

Marie glared at Halter with an insecure look.

“Get up, you fat oaf. Get all the calculation data of around 120 seconds to me right now.”

“Alright. I’ll get them…ah,also.”

“What’s it!? Hu-Hurry up! Rush!”

In the face of Marie’s terrifying look, Halter said,

“I get it already. Can you please put on some underwear, at least?”

“?”

Taken aback, Marie’s movement, expression and breathing ceased in unison.

“…”

Nothing.

She was not wearing anything.

Or rather, she was naked.

This genius girl had her hands placed on her hips, standing proudly whilst fully exposed.

“09:47, 4 July 2015 (UTC)09:47, 4 July 2015 (UTC)~!!!”

The moment she lifted her head, Halter was nowhere in sight.

The palm she instinctively raised had lost its target, and her face was beetroot as she hurried back into the room.

●●●

Halter soon came back as according to Marie’s behest.

Marie had randomly picked up the clothes she had discarded in the room, and the instant she wore them, a knock on the door could be heard.

“–You may come in”

She spoke stiffly.

The instant she said this, Halter walked in with a stack of data.

Marie was intending to at least break one of Halter’s shins as she waited, but had to give up on the notion once she saw an observation team members follow behind Halter.

Leaving aside her appearance in front of a rugged hooligan, there was no way she could be disgraceful in front of her elite staff members.

Marie resisted the urge to click her tongue as she shot Halter a sharp glare.

–Die, you hoodlum.

One had to wonder whether Halter comprehended the meaning behind that stare. He arched his body slightly and left the pile of data in his clutches onto the table.

The observation team leader, Hannes, took out a piece of data, and handed it to Marie.

“Professor Marie, from the observation data we have gathered–”

“There’s an intermittent change in gravity?”

Marie seized the opportunity to answer first.

Upon his words being interrupted, Hannes widened his eyes.

“Oh, I`m really surprised. Have you already realized it?”

“Just a wild guess. I had a feeling that would be the case.”

“Yes, it is as you said, professor. The value has increased from 0.92 to 1.04 during this one hour. There has been 3 instances of intermittent gravity changes.”

“…A change of 0.1G? No, it should be a smaller difference, right? It’s a good thing that you managed to observe it. Isn’t this a shock large enough to wake anyone up?”

Halter interrupted with some really sloppy respectful language.

“You’re already made into a cyborg anyway. The Tourbillion mechanism grafted inside you meant that any error levels in gravity changes will be negated.”

Marie answered as she watched the body that was much bulkier and taller than anyone else.

Halter, acting as Marie’s bodyguard and secretary, was originally a ‘technician’ born in the military, and his body was already turned into a cyborg when he was young. His physical power was such that he would wreck a combat automata with a single punch, but in contrast, his delicate senses were not as sharp as a real body.

“Even so, this value is at best about the weight of someone riding on an elevator, no?”

“It’s still enough. That’s still not the main problem.”

“Though the change itself is just erroneous, the problem is the value itself. The values on the frequency graph shows unprecedented situation if we compare the data over the last 30 years. Even though it’s maintaining a constant gravitational value of 1.03…”

“If we read into the observed data, that’s more or less,”

–Marie felt her body weigh heavier, and stopped talking.

It was not a weight that would cause her to collapse, but it was a change that was not to be ignored.

Marie calmly analyzed the gravitational pull weight on her, and murmured,

“–It’s 1.34 now.”

“Professor Marie, this after all…”

“Yeah, we can’t solve this with a simple deduction of ‘just a simple gravity anomaly’. Looking at the rate this changes, everyone above the gears will be affected.”

That meant that,

“In the worst case scenario, we may have a collapse of the city structure.”

“–!!”

Marie’s calm words caused everyone present to tense up.

This extent of gravitational change was at best equivalent to someone in a drunken stupor.

But what if there was a stronger gravitational force than that? Or when zero gravity occurred?

They might end up being crushed by their own weight, or they could be sent flying into space.

Or perhaps the damage could be beyond what the escapement could contain, and the machinery would be malfunctioned.

It would be fine if it were an automobile or a house/mansion, but if the 12 ‘Clock towers’ that controlled the city’s environments and the ‘Core Tower’ that stood in the center, extended towards the stratosphere were to be destroyed–they would not be able to rebuild the city.

This city, Kyoto, would vanish forever.

The ‘Clockwork Planet’, a world comprised of gears, was a black technology nobody could replicate even after 1000 years.

This was the same even for this Meister, one of the 6305 Meisters in

the world.

“–Listen to me, everyone.”

Marie spoke.

She looked around at the uneasy looking workers, and spoke with an adamant.

“I suppose everyone has realized that the situation is critical. This certainly is a weird case, whether it was the sudden dispatch or a simple malfunction report–”

Once she spoke till here, she paused.

Her legs were spread as wide as her shoulders, her left hand on her waist as she raised her right arm leisurely.

Though she had the body of a petite girl, she had a queenly vibe to her as she continued.

“Everyone here is recognized as a first-rate technician. Sure, we may not be comparable to ‘Y’ who created the world, but you and I are elites gathered all over the world. Nobody can surpass us, and there is no malfunction we can’t solve. First, we have to think of this and admit this.”

This arrogant-sounding words caused every worker present to change their expressions.

–Right, none of the technicians sent here were incompetent.

All of them started from ‘Rearing’, and after the baptism of working at the scenes, were promoted to Gazelle’. Once they combined their talents and experience together, they attained the level of ‘first-class’, seasoned technicians.

There was no exception amongst them, from the commander Marie till the observation staff; they were first grade talents any enterprises, even the ‘military’ would welcome with open arms.

“Right. We’re the ‘Meister Guild’.”

‘Meister Guild’.

An international organization that aimed to maintain and preserve the planetary structure. More than half of the Meisters in the world

were affiliated with this organization full or technicians, and it had the the most cutting edge technology and equipment to deal with all sorts of malfunctions in the world.

Their actions were not hindered by any government or philosophy. They were a non-governmental organization.

This is the ‘Meister Guild’.

“It does look like the ‘Guild’ always has special reasons to hurry us over from one end of the world to intervene here. The ‘military’ attitude does seem to show that they’re doing some unspeakable dealings…well, we’re already used to being hated by them anyway, right?”

There were wry grins showing on the staff’s faces, showing their experiences when dealing with the ‘military’.

“The work this time looks like it’ll take quite some effort, so let’s enjoy it as much as we can.”

Marie’s tone seemed to indicate that was really her intent; she sounded really riled up.

“I don’t know what else will happen, but we can **conclude** that ‘we don’t have time’.”

In for a penny, in for a pound; with such a mentality, she said,

“Observation team, hurry up and confirm which level of the core tower is causing this. Any ordinary technicians out there will need a year to finish this–**I want you to finish this in two weeks!**”

“”Roger that!””””

Marie had tasked them with an utterly, ridiculously difficult request, but all the staff present responded enthusiastically.

●●●

After watching the observation team leave to their work as per instructed, Marie slumped into the temporary bed.

“Ahh…that was tiring.”

“Sure was tough. That was a moving speech.”

Marie groaned as she looked up at the ceiling, and Halter handed her a cup that was giving off steam. Inside it was a thoroughly stirred hot cocoa, filled with much milk and sugar.

Marie got up to receive the cup,and curled her lips into a grimace.

“I’m really grateful to those guys, to be willing to be fooled by this young lady’s speech.”

“Everyone is being fooled knowingly. They’re all adults after all.”

“Really?”

“Of course. How can an idiot be a Meister and really act calmly after seeing a city’s functions.being impaired? I’m a technician stuck at the ‘Gazelle’ level, and even I knew that much.”

“…”

Halter brought a foldable chair to Marie, and sat down in front of her.

“It’s scary. This isn’t something we can put up with. If you mess up here, people will die, and the city will be gone in ashes. There’s no way to salvage it. Despite that, everyone’s working like a gambler, afraid yet willing to bet on–you see, there’s still a young lady who’s still trying to act tough even though she’s waiting herself.”

“…It really does sound silly.”

“Of course. It’s laughable.”

Halter silently gave a smile, and continued.

“You laughed, get fooled, and still acted tough. If such a cute lady is able to laugh it off like that, wouldn’t it be embarrassing for the adults to run away from the line of duty?”

“You sure can talk even though you’re like that, Halter.”

Marie smiled, and brought the cup to her lips.

She enjoyed the sugars of the cocoa, and it created a delightful

sensation in her tired brain.

“So, how about you get down to work? As an adult.”

“Yes, as you wish, Milady.”

“Go investigate the ‘military’. I want to know what they know.”

“Hm? They promised to reveal all information to us now?”

“It’s true that there’s nothing suspicious about the simulation data they divulged to us, but it’s not like they’ll obediently hand over all the data to as. I want that proof and contents.”

“You mean–”

Halter hushed his voice and spoke with a stern look,

“–The ‘military’ is hiding news about a fatal malfunction, no?”

“We can at least assume that there’s such a possibility.”

“…Is the situation that bad?”

“Maybe. It is concerning that the ‘Guild’ headquarters never briefed us on anything before sending us all the way here.”

“Private information, maybe? But if they have grasped any hidden secrets the ‘military’ and Japanese government have, the headquarters will at least explain, right?”

“Maybe they don’t have solid proof. Besides, it’s not like the ‘Guild’ has nothing to with the outside world. They can’t ignore the intentions of the 5 great enterprises backing us–and there’s a group of guys wanting to eliminate me.”

“…Hey hey, that’s scary.”

Marie smirked.

“It’s because of this that you’re here, right?”

Marie Bell Breguet.

The youngest Meister in history was the darling princess of the Breguet Company’s chairman, one of the 5 great enterprises.

Due to that talent and prestige, she was already used to the stares of envy and hatred despite her not being criticized straight in the face. There were lots of scoundrels wanting to pull her down, and when those people tried to deal with her through violence, it would be Halter's job to protect her.

"It's alright if it's just me worrying too much, but I want insurance on this."

"Understood. I'll go check it out anyway."

The instant Halter stood up, someone knocked on the door.

"? –Come in."

"Please excuse me."

A observation team member, who had just left the room a while back, entered upon being granted the permission by Marie.

"What is it? Any progress in the work?"

"Well actually, I'm reporting about the container for the YD-01."

"Hm? You found RyuZU?"

Marie inadvertently tried to stand up, and the worker stammered, seemingly having difficulty in talking.

"Well, about that…after analysing the flight trajectory in reverse, we managed to confirm where it landed. We did send a team to the scene to reclaim it…"

"And then?"

Marie felt anxious over how uneasy the worker sounded as she clenched her fists.

"Unfortunately, it fell onto an apartment."

"…Apartment?"

"Yes. Due to the impact of that fall,well…the entire apartment collapsed."

"–HUH!?"

Her throat inadvertently let out a strange voice.

At the same time, the cup fell from her hand.

The piping hot cocoa rained onto her knees, causing her to roll about due to the scalding.

The young worker could only ask concernly whilst the genius girl nearly fainted,

“Ar-Are you alright, Professor Marie!?”

“No…I-I’m fin..”

Marie answered as she desperately swallowed the moan that rose to her throat. She grabbed the towel Halter provided as he stood sidelong, and with a teary look, she stared at the worker.

“It-It collap…sed?”

“Y-Yes, well…to put it, it seemed to be an old dilapidated set of apartments in the first place.”

“Wait, hey! Don’t tell me people died!?”

Halter nearly shrieked, and the reporting worker hurriedly denied it,

“No, the good thing amongst all these is that we haven’t found any dead people. There’re only a few people living inside such a large set of apartments, and there was quite some time from the fall till the collapse, so it seemed they were able to evacuate in time.”

“I-Is that so? that’s good…”

Marie answered as she wiped the cocoa off herself, but the worker continued,

“W-Well, about that…it’s not exactly a good thing.”

“? What’s the other problem?”

“In other words, the apartments have fallen.”

“You just mentioned that.”

Marie frowned skeptically, and the staff worker showed an anxious

look,

“I’m saying that it fell! The YD-01 container has fallen below the city grid along with the apartments!”

“–!!!”

For the first time in quite a while, Marie felt her eyes narrow into dots.

She then unintentionally asked.

“What did you just say?”

“The YD-01 container has collapsed below the city grid. The good news is that the collapsed rubble is still left in the crust, but it’s likely that reclamation will be very tough as we have no machinery to deal with wood and dirt…”

“Hey…”

Halter could only groan as he placed a hand on his forehead.

This time, even he did not have the luxury to make any cheeky comments, but upon seeing that his master was still shocked, he finally recovered, and whispered,

“…Anyway, let’s contact headquarters. Explain the losses this time to the person in charge of the legal department, and get excavation machinery over here. That thing’s a resource the Breguet Corporation can’t ignore, so perhaps they’ll send someone over once we explain matters.”

“Y-Yes…I guess. I’m sorry, but can I leave the procedures to you?”

“Understood.”

Halter nodded, and brought the reporting staff worker out of the room.

Marie closed the door, and was left alone in the room, curling her lips in a self-deprecating manner.

“…It looks like this is really becoming quite an enjoyable job.”

●●●

At the same time–3.17am, 46 seconds.

Naoto Miura opened his eyes.

He was in a park, a sports park with a wide field and playground facilities for infants and toddlers to play. Naoto was lying in a rest corner located in a corner of the park, covering his ears and gritting his teeth.

"…Shut up."

There was a distorted noise.

It was common for him to hear the abnormal unpleasant noises from the city structure, but that was exceptionally shrill.

At the 24th basement level of the core tower, approximately 70,620m down below, the gears were giving off an unpleasant noise.

For this reason, he was awoken up. Normally, such noises could be insulated through the use of his favorite headphones–however, his headphones…or rather.,

"Why…am I sleeping at such a place?"

He murmured to himself, tilting his head.

His body was as heavy as a lead block, for he was sleeping on a hard place. It did not seem as if he had just napped at all.

"You're awake, Master Naoto."

A clear, beautiful voice rang could be heard from behind, ringing his head that was yet to be fully awake.

He looked back, and saw an angelic face just inches from him, and inadvertently reared his head back.

Her gold dazzling eyes of precious stones were staring right at him.

She was a breathtaking beauty–yet had the expression of a man-made object that was hard to read into.

…I believe this…?

He struggled to adjust his posture, but tumbled over.

For the heavy pressure was suddenly exerted upon him.

The hand supporting his body slipped, and he fell from the bench

The back of his head then slammed into the sturdy edge of the bench hard.

“OOOUUUUUCCCCHHHHHH!!!! MY HEAD FEELS LIKE IT’S GOING TO BREAK APART!!!”

And as Naoto was groaning away, cupping his head in agony, a lovely voice rang from above,

“This is a new form of gymnastics, no? It certainly is a stylish form that transcends time.”

“That’s not it! What was that just now?”

“A fluctuation in gravity, it seems. I suppose it’s a trivial error in the city structure.”

“The damned government. Just do that maintenance, will ya!”

Naoto grumbled as he got up.

He dusted his clothes, and faced the owner of this beautiful voice.

The girl was seated with her knees on her bench, and Naoto was secretly flustered upon realizing that he had been sleeping on her thighs until the moment he woke up.

“You’re called, RyuZU…right?”

“Yes. I’m the 1st unit for the Initial-Y series, RyuZU.”

Upon seeing her show such an elegant mile as she answered, Naoto’s memory finally kicked into gear as he quickly recalled what happened the previous night.

And then, after sorting through what had happened, he could only laugh blankly,

“…That was a crazy night.”

Everything had been per usual till the moment he returned home.

But once he entered the bathroom, a meteorite fell, and it turned out to be an enigmatic package with an angelic automata within–in the end, he decided to stay within the collapsing building and carrying out a repair work of life and death.

“Ah, right! What happened to my house?”

“If it’s about the house you lived in, Master Naoto,”

In response to Naoto’s words, RyuZU responded with a stare.

There was red smoke rising at the place she was looking up, dissolving into the black sky.

“Is that…the apartment where I used to live?”

“Yes. There was a fire and a collapse afterwards, thus the evacuation here.”

Upon listening closely, he would hear the sirens of the fire brigade amidst the noises in the city.

It seemed this was the park several blocks away from his apartment; upon calming down, he looked around, and affirmed that these were familiar surroundings.

“…Haha, good bye, my home…so I’m now homeless?”

Naoto could not help but cherish the memories as he watched what used to be his home, now no different from a wasteland.

“I don’t have any money too. What do I do now…”

“About that.”

RyuZU spoke calmly,

“I took your clothes and valuables before your home was completely collapsed.”

“What?”

Upon her words, Naoto’s eyes gathered upon the items placed on the table.

“Ohh! My wallet, bank book and seal! And my headphones!”

He put on his favorite cheap headphones without hesitation. Besides the aforementioned items, there was his school bag, uniform, sneakers, handheld devices, and others placed there.

Having thought that his valuables were reduced to rubble along with his apartment, Naoto was squealing for joy at this unexpected outcome.

“Please allow me to apologize for reading your bank book on my own initiative…your name is Naoto Miura…am I correct?’

“Eh?”

The instant she asked him this, Naoto realized that he had yet to introduce himself.

“Ahh…well, yeah.”

“–Then.”

RyuZu remained seated in Seiza as she lowered her head respectfully.

“I am grateful that you did my adjustments. Also, while I am not certain on the details, I do sincerely apologize about destroying your residence, Master Naoto. Perhaps I should bury the heads of the ones responsible into the dirt and make them apologize, for now, I…”

RyuZU was elegant and old-fashioned, but at the same time, Naoto was entranced by the venomous spite in her apology.

The specifications she showed after being repaired was boggling.

Soon after she was rebooted, she had the decision making ability to assess the surroundings.

She had the mobility to escape together with Naoto from the collapsing building.

And also, she even managed to gather all his finances from the collapsed building during the time he was unconscious.

And more important–that fluent apology.

“There’s nothing to apologize.”

Naoto shook his head.

“Anyway, I’m amazed by your capabilities, RyuZU, to the point of tears.”

“That will be perfect. Then, will you allow me to register you as my master and serve alongside you, Master Naoto?”

RyuZU reached her hand at Naoto.

Master Identification .

The bond between master and slave.

“Eh…?”

This sudden abnormal feeling caused Naoto to hesitate.

“No, that, wait…”

RyuZU tilted her little head skeptically,

“Then, is there anything inconvenient? Is it because this flawless, impeccable me will damage your mitochondria-like pride if I am to be by your side, Master Naoto?”

–The tone RyuZU spoke with the instant she was first activated.

Her words were vicious, not holding any punches; for some reason however, there was no sense of dissatisfaction formed within him.

Naoto shook his head, preventing his mind from straying away from the topic at hand, and answered,

“That’s not it, RyuZU. You’re an amazing automata, aren’t you?”

‘Yes. Have you understand?”

“There’re so many parts in that small body of yours, your functions and style are beautiful, you’re a perfect masterpiece.”

“Yes, I am relieved to see that you have such eye for beauty besides being a knothole, Master Naoto.”

“No matter what kind of new automata brands there are, there’ll be

none as charming as you, RyuZU!”

“Yes, that is a certainty. Certainly, I have no idea regarding the abilities of the latest automata, but if humanity were to be able to create tools that barely reach the level of my ankles, my mechanical functions would not have ceased for 206 years.”

RyuZU immediately answered with confidence.

These words caused Naoto to exclaim in shock.

“206 years? Speaking of which, when were you created anyway, RyuZU?”

“About 1000 years ago.”

“A millenium–?”

Approximately a millenium ago.

In other words–she was an automata created during the time the Earth was outfitted with gears.

…This is?

Is this the perfect automata that can only be described as ‘ultimate’?

–Right, why didn’t I feel suspicious about it in the first place?

What exactly is ‘she’, this automata even the latest oncs could not compare to.

“RyuZU…what are you exactly?”

“What, as in?”

“That’s what I’m wondering! You fell from the sky! You’re super cute, and have that ‘I am of superior technology’ feeling around you!”

“So what?”

“No, that’s…anyway, I’m a high school student, you know?”

“Is that so? Since you were able to repair me, Master Naoto, I believe you’re the human with the most outstanding technical skills on this world, no?”

“No no no no! How can that be possible? I’m just an ordinary high school student, a failure of humans even. If I’m to say, I’m not popular!”

“–Then, why did you activate me?”

And so, RyuZU asked with an intrigued look.

“Well, that’s…”

Naoto suddenly realized,

…Why?

RyuZU was right? What did he want to do after fixing the automata?

He again turned to face RyuZU again.

–This antique doll was created more that 1000 years ago.

It was true that she has that cuteness, beauty and perfection that was unapproachable.

…But was she too perfect?

She showcased some specifications beyond that of military automata soon after she was activated, to a befuddling extent even, whether it was the conversation before, or the display of emotions. If it was the expression of emotions and daily conversations, the current automata would be able to do them well, but would clearly give the impression of artificial beings.

In contrast, RyuZU had the vibe of a living person.

Even if she was abandoned 1000 years ago, this level of automata could not possibly be something man-made. If it was a civilian servant girl doll created by an enterprise…the specifications were way too high.

What if she was made by the ‘military’?

She did not seem to be mass produced; was she the prototype of a secretly created weapon?

…No no, that would be impossible.

Even if she was a military automata of the latest kind, there was no reason or significance in making her take the form of a young girl.

Perhaps technology-wise, it was plausible, but if such a pretty girl new generation weapon were to be release, there was no doubt that the developer's head would be sent flying.

The more he thought about it, the more perplexed he got.

What sort of person exactly created such an automata, with what intentions?

–Was she created with abnormal intentions?

–Was there actually a shocking secret hidden within it?

Upon thinking about it, even though she was a flawless, super cute automata…there was no way he could simply invoke a contract in the heat of the moment.

"–Is, that so…"

It seemed RyuZU had sensed Naoto's thoughts.

She then retracted her outstretched hand silently.

Her temperament, calmness, smiling face showed a all-too-realistic tinge of emotion.

Because of it, the subtle change was clear to see.

"I'm…an existence that's not need."

It was a lamentation, one of melancholy and loneliness feeling that she was not needed by anyone.

At that instance, a balance scale appeared in Naoto's mind.

On both sides were the flawless automata and the unknown risks of being attacked at any given moment.

Which of the two sides was heavier? Perhaps that was the meaning?

…All right then.

Naoto grinned in his heart, and first, he placed RyuZU on the left side of the scale.

The instant he put it on, the scale was weighed down, blasting the table to bits and causing the floor to be blown to smithereens, destroying all of Naoto's rationality, hesitation, concerns and other important factors, resulting in a deformation–

"I'M SORRYRYYYYYYYYYYYY!!!! I REALLY WANT YOUUUUUUU–!!"

Naoto knelt down at the speed of light.

And at that instance, he revealed his true intentions.

"I'm forcing myself too much! I never intended to give up on you! No matter what happens in the future, please continue to take care of my long life from now on!!"

He yelled as he knelt down, his head on the floor, his arms raised as high as possible.

Right, these were clearly the true thoughts in his mind.

Is there anything to think about it? Which idiot will let such a 'treasure' get away!

Creator? Original owner? RyuZU's true identity? Like heck I care about them!

Even if the mastermind's the 'military' or some other enterprise; nothing else matters as long I get RyuZU. That's for sure!

"–Then, please allow me to borrow your right hand. Also, will you please stand up if possible?"

Naoto stood up as if he was shot, and quickly reached his right hand out.

RyuZU's hands took Naoto's palm.

"Then, please excuse me–*aum*"

The ring finger was sucked into the mouth, from the tip to the metacarpal.

A startling sensation ran down Naoto's back, causing him to inadvertently let out a sound.

RyuZU's soft, moist tongue was throbbing inside her mouth, licking

Naoto's ring finger delicately as if it was probing into it, wrapping around it, stirring inside. The lubricating fluids secreted from the soft materials was causing bubbles, making a slurping sound.

I'm going to melt. Naoto thought.

Naoto had a feeling that he was being consumed in RyuZU's mouth for eternity, starting from the finger. The beautiful angelic girl was in doing an obscene act of putting his finger inside her mouth, causing him to feel an inexplicable sense of guilt and unspeakable

delight.

Just when Naoto was about to pass out from the scorching sensation burning his mind.

–The sound of countless gears spinning in unison within RyuZU could be heard.

“Nn…ahn…”

Was this the end of the identification?

RyuZU’s mouth slowly left Naoto’s finger.

Ignoring the state of blankness in his mind, Naoto touched RyuZU’s face with his liberated palm. It was a mass of warmth and tenderness…

RyuZU’s eyes were moist as she leaned upon that hand, and at the same instant she exhaled hot air,

“–Initial Y series Unit 01–‘Your Slave’ RyuZU pledges her absolute obedience and loyalty to Master Naoto, always staying by your side until the gears in this body break down and stop.”

These words were far beyond that of an ordinary ‘master identification”. Rather, they were comparable to that of the sacred words of a wedding vow, spoken by RyuZU.

●●●

“Wait, I…ca-can…”

As the dazzling morning sun seemed to break through the blue sky.

Naoto was huffing and puffing, panting pathetically at the Kamo Bridge railing.

“Th-That’s impossible…RyuZU. I really…can’t do this anymore.”

“Master Naoto, I am really impressed that your frail body is able to last till today considering that you’re panting from this level of exercise.”

“…After, what happened yesterday, haa, and considering that I never slept at all, didn’t have a proper meal…I’m amazed that you’re, calling me weak…when I have, to run to school…”

“I’m honored to receive your praise.”

The sarcasm he managed to say after gathering much courage was easily brushed aside.

They were an hour’s walk away from ‘what was originally’ Naoto’s apartment, moving along the Kamogawa. The white school campus was located at the “Kamogawa Delta”, at the intersection between Takanogawa and Kamogawa

That was the Tadasu no Mori High School Naoto attended in Kyoto.

I may not look this way, but I do have a perfect attendance record. The moment he said this to RyuZU, he was practically dragged along by her, running all the way here…

However, the time shown on the watch was 7.12am…way too much time before class began

In the face of such a fact, Naoto spoke to RyuZU with tears in his eyes,

“Speaking of which, I’m really a homeless person…I should be worrying about things like having a bed or dinner more than rushing to school for class, right?”

“Please rest assured. I shall handle all these matters while you are attending class in school, Master Naoto. If my carelessness prevented you from having a perfect attendance record no matter the reason, my pride too will be gone.”

Naoto cocked an eye at RyuZU,

“Then what if your master nearly dies because of sleep deprivation and excessive fatigue?”

“That is because of your uselessness and weakness, Master Naoto. I shall not bear responsibility for any negligence in upbringing during the time before I arrived.”

“Hm, even though that is the case…”

“To be honest, it is none of my business.”

“You’re really direct!”

Naoto, upon hearing such verbal violence, ended up laughing however.

Every single word RyuZU spouted was certainly vicious, but it was not distasteful.

–It’s definitely not because I got a new interest; Naoto told himself.

“…Master Naoto?”

“Ah, sorry. Speaking of which, what do you plan to do for the aftermath? I only have enough funds for food this month.”

“I never had any expectations regarding your abilities, Master Naoto, so please be assured. I alone can raise money for shelter and subsistence.”

RyuZU said nonchalantly.

And so, Naoto looked displeased.

“Are you going to work, RyuZU? That’s…”

“You certainly do say some strange things, Master Naoto. Please think with your common sense. How do you earn money through hard work?”

“…This is the first time I’m hearing such strange logic.”

“Besides, I am of your possession, Master Naoto. Even if it a temporary matter, it is impossible theoretically or physically for people of humble backgrounds to use money when they do not know the workings.”

"_"

…Is this actually the case of a Tsundere?

Naoto's lips inadvertently broke into a smile, and he hurriedly changed the topic.

"Then, what do you want to do exactly…?"

"Master Naoto, do not ask too much about such trivial matters. Even if you are down for the count, an elite has to remain positive at all times."

"I don't remember being that amazing…but nevermind."

Naoto sighed as he said, and continued.

"Actually, I spent 3 hours repairing you yesterday, RyuZu…my mind and body are completely tired now. If you can help deal with some troublesome matters–speaking of which, what's the matter?"

Naoto lifted his head, and saw RyuZU stand still with her eyes widened.

After maintaining that pose for 5 seconds,

"…Sorry for making you worry. I deliberately repeated the words 20 million times in my mind so that I did not mistake what you had just said, Master Naoto."

"Eh? Di-Did I say anything strange?"

"You said that you repaired me in 3 hours."

"Eh, yeah. I did."

"…May I ask a question?"

"Oh. Okay. What's on your mind?"

RyuZU elegantly pleased her hand on her chest.

"May you tell me–the total number of gears that form me?"

"Erm…4,207,600,008,643?"

"Please answer me, what is the number of regular vibrations in my

main cylinder?"

"The largest part in the spine, right? If I'm not mistaken, it's 6,254,941,395."

"…How many strands of artificial neural networks are there in my springs?"

"There are 15,945,549,846 directly connected ones, and if considering the ones connected to the resonants, there are 62,945,634,574,578 of them."

"…Allow me to ascertain, Master Naoto. Have you seen my design plan?"

"No? Anyway, does such a thing exist anyway?"

"It doesn't. Logically, there shouldn't be one, which is why I am asking this. How do you know the details of my construct?"

"Why?"

"It is impossible to analyze my structure in a mere 3 hours through the use of a personal simulation device–no, this applies even for professional devices. Thus, I could only assume that you had seen my blueprint before."

RyuZU persisted with her question, and Naoto looked befuddled as he tilted his head.

"But you're right in front of me now, you know? Even if I don't investigate everything one by one, I just need to hear to understand, right? Logically put."

RyuZU continued to stare at Naoto skeptically.

"This is the first time I am hearing of such strange common sense; sound, is it?"

"Well, I guess it's kinda like a skill. My hearing has always been better than others, so my ears can hear everything in a machine construct even if I don't see it directly."

"In other words, even me?"

"Yeah, I just need to hear. Your body's so pretty anyway, RyuZU. There weren't any excess parts in you, so I quickly knew where the

fault is. There's some noise in that wonderful sound, and I was angry, so I started to repair it. I don't regret this."

"…"

"Hm? What is it, RyuZU?"

"Master Naoto."

"Yes?"

"Master Naoto's a pervert."

"Yes…huh? That has nothing to do with our conversation, right?"

Naoto got up with a dumbfounded look.

"It's about time for us to move."

During the time they were resting, the number of students heading to school was increasing. They stared at the duo while crossing the bridge, murmuring some things along the way."

RyuZU stared at them in an intriguing manner, and asked,

"…It seems the stares are gathered upon us. What is the reason?"

"Ah, well, it's because someone like me is being with you, I guess."

Naoto answered, and RyuZU nodded understandingly.

"It is to be expected that this angelic beauty me, a gift from the heavens, is admired by the suffering, humble peasants. Please pardon me for asking such a foolish question."

"Eh, that's somewhat true, but I'm here too."

"In other words, their awe had multiplied because they have witnessed this heavenly pearl in me stand alongside Master Naoto, the apex of humanity?"

"No, it's actually 'why's that useless bastard being together with such a super cute girl'?"

"Master Naoto, I do find that your appearance is of the lowest denominator, but it certainly does not mean that you are being scorned by those humans that are lower than the ants scurrying on

the ground.”

“Even I will cry if you keep that up.”

Naoto was about to pass out on the spot, but shook his head,

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I deserve it anyway, and I’m already used to it.”

But in response to his words, RyuZU shook her head unhappily.

“No, it’s not good at all.”

“Why?”

“Because that is irrational and inexplicable. I do not understand what reasons this group of people have in deeming you as someone inferior?”

Naoto raised his eyebrow in disbelief.

“I want to ask instead, how highly do you think of me, RyuZU?”

“Master Naoto, you are the only human who is able to reinstate me from my broken state.”

“But isn’t that just what you see, RyuZU? Most people don’t think of me this way.”

“Is that not because they are inferior, incapable beings who are unable to understand–”

“But they’re the ones who form society, RyuZU. Those who can’t be understood by everyone are no different from non-existences; this is the rule of this society.”

…After a long silence, RyuZU unhappily spoke,

“I do admit it is vexing to be rebuffed by you, Master Naoto, but I do admit that what you said makes sense.”

“So you understand. Is there anything else?”

“Sorry. Is there something else I may ask?”

“Hm? What is it?”

RyuZU called Naoto just as the latter was about to leave, seemed to ponder about something, and asked in a probing manner.

“It seems that such creatures known as humans have a strange habit of using their interest in a large unspecified number of people from the opposite gender as a symbol of superiority.”

“I really want to know exactly where did you hear that from; well, never mind, you’re right. So?”

“Is that the ‘outstanding point’ element commonly understood in the group you belong to, Master Naoto?”

“Hm? That’s quite the leap in topic…”

Naoto tilted his head as he said.

“Anyway, those popular guys will typically get high opinions. They do have people around them after all.”

“–Understood.”

“I’m not really sure what’s going on, but I’ll be going first?”

“Alright. I shall see you later then, Master Naoto.”

Naoto left for the school campus, sensing an inexplicable feeling from RyuZU’s stare.

He passed through the side doors where the shoe lockers were, and went straight for the main entrance. His indoor shoes were already stolen long ago, so he simply borrowed the guest’ indoor shoes.

He hurried towards the classroom as the sound of footsteps rang.

There was buzzing on the corridor as he approached his classroom, but nobody went to greet Naoto upon meeting him. If there was a difference from before, it would be that there were occasional snickering and muttering amongst them.

He entered the classroom, placed his bag on the thoroughly vandalized desk he was so endeared with, and sat down at the chair. It was Naoto’s daily routine to pretend to sleep until the class bell ring, as a mean of passing the time.

He laid down on the bed, and suddenly recalled what RyuZU said.

“Opinion, huh…?”

To be honest, he had no interest after all.

An outstanding weirdo would be accepted simply for saying the right things, while the useless weirdos would be treated as a black sheep.

He had no intention to hide, whether it was his own incompetence or his anomaly.

Thus, this was something he deserved. It was troublesome, but he could not salvage anything.

He thought about these as he laid prone on the table, and really felt sleepy.

…Well, too many things happened this morning, so I guess it can’t be helped…

Normally, he would wake up once the form teacher entered, but he shall sleep for the day.

And so, Naoto gradually fell into a deep slumber.

●●●

“–Nn..?”

The strange commotion in the class caused Naoto to be awakened.

Is it lunch break already? He stared at the clock, and found that it was 10.46am.

In other words, the 3rd period was starting, and he only slept for 2 hours.

What are they fussing about? Naoto raised his head skeptically.

“Ah…it is sudden, but I’ll introduce a new transfer student.”

The teacher for the 3rd period was at the podium along with a girl.

It was a pretty girl whose presence alone would attract the stares of others.

She had pure silver flowing hair, crystal white skin, thin pink lips, rosy cheeks, and golden eyes that were shining like a crown.

That beauty nobody in humanity could even imagine caused everyone to be stunned.

"…Whatcha doing?"

Naoto inadvertently blurt in dialect.

The girl standing at the podium probably heard him, for she took a step forward and waved her little hand at him.

At this point, the class, which had been completely mesmerized by the peerless beauty, turned their many stares upon their isolated and unimpressive classmate.

"My name is RyuZU Yourslave. I shall be classmates with everyone, but I have no interest in spending any time with common peasant folks, so it is fine even if you do not take care of me."

The silver-haired girl greeted with a blooming smile, and Naoto again collapsed onto the table.

●●●

"I assumed that this will clearly show your 'outstanding aspects' to your group."

"–Ahh…well, yeah, I guess. Don't you know of the term overkill however?'

Naoto shrugged in the face of the surrounding stares.

There was envy, hatred, disgust, malice…if those stares were able to cause physical damage, Naoto would have been shredded to nothingness.

"If the other person's a beauty like you, RyuZU, it's a case of 'why that guy'?"

“..This is my honest opinion, but I feel it is much easier to teach cows how to walk on their hind legs than to find rationality in humans.”

“Yeah, I can’t deny it.”

For Naoto, the day had been havoc for him from the 3rd period onwards.

RyuZU forcefully seized the seat right beside Naoto, and clung onto him during lesson time. When it was time for lunch break at the cafeteria, she sat on his thigh in a diagonal manner ‘Ah–‘ and made Naoto feed her with a monotonous tone. After that, they went to the grass patch in the courtyard, and she grabbed Naoto by the head, forcefully giving him a lap pillow…

Though Naoto was not the type who intended to care about how others viewed him (if he were, he would no longer be able to declare himself as weird), he was not brazen enough to enjoy RyuZU’s lap pillow when the scything pressure upon him could rip him to shreds.

RyuZU too did all sorts of intimate acts with him without any restraint. The classmates were simply watching the duo from afar, abstaining from the usual questions for transfer students. It was only after school that a few bold students stood up.

However…

“E-Erm, do you have sometime?”

“Yes? Is there anything you want with me?”

“Ah, ye-yeah. Regarding your transfer, there should be–”

“But I do not have any particular reason to look for you. If you excuse me.”

“If there are any queries–eh?”

…

“Hey! RyuZU’s really pretty!”

“Yeah, I know. So what?”

“…Eh, let’s think. RyuZU–”

“Will you please not call my by my name directly with that fraction of a brain? And please do not call me affectionately and understand your–no, there is no need for me to repeat it. It will simply be a waste of time.”

…

“Ah–I’m the second year…”

“I suppose you really hate me, deliberately making it all the way here from upstairs and ruin my mood. I do apologize that my senses are not sensitive enough to care for any ants, so please return.”

“Eh, no, but–I’m still rather pop–”

“I already said to disappear from my sights, or–is human language too difficult for you to understand?”

…

“Ah–”

“If you had thought through it and have already planned to say something that will consume the oxygen on Earth, many lives that have made noble sacrifices for your exothermic heat and my irreplaceable time–please continue.”

…

One could say that bodies were lying everywhere.

RyuZU kept giving Naoto angelic smiles whenever she spoke to him, but had a stoic expression when talking to others, monotonous when talking, her devilish verbals jabs piercing through others.

And so, there were boys and girls, more than 20 in total, dealt with tremendous damage during the time Naoto and RyuZU left the classroom till the moment they reached the school gate.

●●●

Once they exited the school gates, Naoto and RyuZU were headed down the Kamogawa River.

They were headed towards the cross junction at Demachiyanagi, passing by the old men running energetically and college students practising with their musical instruments.

RyuZU turned back and glanced at Naoto, who walked on with heavy steps.

“You look rather lethargic, Master Naoto.”

“Eh, yeah…thanks to you. I guess this is how it feels to be on tenterhooks…”

“You certainly are a scaredy cat to be so mindful of such unremarkable stares–though I am not especially surprised by this.”

“Stop it already. I’m seeing myself in a new realm by now.”

Naoto slouched his body in depression, and said,

“–Speaking of which, I got something to ask you. How did you transfer in?”

RyuZU calmly answered in a matter of fact,

“Of course, I handed a transfer request form.”

“Even if you said it so reactively, is it really possible for you to send the transfer request in this morning, and complete it on the day itself?’

“I merely had ‘a chat’ with the principal.”

“…’Chat’?”

“It is fine for you not to understand, Master Naoto.”

“No wait, why do I suddenly have a bad feeling about this?”

“It’s really nothing much. I simply did some adjustments to the hairy accessory on the hair, and even when serious, I merely said a few words.”

“A threat!? That’s a threat, right!?”

“No. I merely stated ‘a little’ wish right after our chat.”

“…I say, RyuZU, you did say that you’ll settle lodging and money.

Are you going to do that through criminal methods…?”

“Master Naoto.”

RyuZU spoke with such an alluring smile,

“Speaking of which, it is an eternal form of common sense–that it is a crime only when found out, no?”

“……Right, I’ll just pretend that I never heard anything. Speaking of which, you said you found a place for us to stay at. Where’s it?”

“We’ll see it soon. It is the hotel right around the corner of that building, called ‘The Uh-huh’.”

“……RyuZU?”

Naoto suddenly stopped in his tracks, and asked,

“If I remember correctly, isn’t that a love hotel?”

Upon hearing Naoto’s doubts, RyuZU widened her eyes,

“–As you say. It is unexpected to hear this from you though, Master Naoto. Have you used it before?”

“That’s impossible. Only the popular folks in class use it often–wait, that doesn’t matter at all! How can we possibly stay in a love hotel?”

“But that love hotel ‘The Uh-huh’ just so happened to have the cheapest rates in the area we’re living in, the Kyoto. The facilities for the residence are most asture.”

“That’s not the problem! If I’m seen walking out from a love story with you, I’ll get expelled immediately, RyuZU.”

“…That is really unacceptable. Now then, I shall hear your noble alternate suggestion, Master Naoto.”

RyuZU frowned, looking somewhat unhappy as she said some spiteful words. Naoto however was frantically racking his brain,

“…An-Anyway, let’s stay at a manga cafe for the night!”

Naoto held RyuZU by the hand and walked off.

They were delayed due to the earlier detour to the love hotel, and because of that, crowds were gathered as they walked down the shopping streets, the surroundings gradually darkening.

The sun had completely set by the time they finally found a suitable manga cafe.

“That’s good. If we wait a little longer, we can get the night package–”

–Naoto looked back at RyuZU, and his expression gloomed.

Three guys flanked her without his knowledge.

They were all young men, probably of college age. One could say that birds of a feather flock together, as their appearances were unkempt, their clothing bedraggled, and they were wearing all sorts of flashy accessories that were clanking.

One of them, hoodlum A was trying to hook up RyuZU in on overly-familiar manner.

“Hey hey hey! Aren’t you quite the remarkable beauty?”

“Yes? So?”

“Ahhahaha, and you even say ‘and so’? You sure are some superior item.”

“Hey hey–you wanna play with us? We’ll treat you to something later~”

Naoto immediately understood what was going on.

These hoodlums, A, B and C were gathered together in an underhanded attempt to hunt the finest prey, RyuZU.

Normally, he did not want to get involved with such people. He would not pay any attention to both parties, and even if he did meet them, he would foolishly laugh and walk away. However–

“!!”

A burning sensation was ignited within Naoto.

Using this impulse, he held RyuZU by the hand.

“Let’s go, RyuZU.”

“Okay.”

RyuZU too nodded, ready to move away. However, the three hoodlums were not going to let go of her so easily.

Two of them encircled Naoto and RyuZU by the front, blocking them.

“Wait a minute, this is a foul now, isn’t it…whatcha doing?”

“She’s going on a date with us later, you know? Step aside, brat.”

Hoodlums A and B were leering obscenely.

The last hoodlum, C was staring at Naoto with bloodshot eyes.

“Who do you think you are anyway? Her boyfriend?”

“Nice gag there, Taku! That’s impossible! Definitely!”

The trio cackled, and hoodlum A, the first one to approached, reached out for RyuZU.

Naoto noticed his actions, and immediately slapped the hand away.

“–Ouch…what’s with you, huh!?”

The trio’s sneers vanished, rage burning in their eyes.

Even so, Naoto hollered whilst spurred by emotions,

“Shut up, don’t you even properly assess yourself and know who you can and can’t get, you self-proclaimed homosapiens!? You’re just thick-skinned, you walking filth!”

–What exactly am I saying here now?

The slightly calmer part in his mind was warning him this.

Though those hoodlums seemed to be unhealthy looking, they were three young men, and he was simply a scrawny, short boy of 16 years old.

If this were to end up becoming a fight, no matter how he struggled, the only future awaiting him would be a sandbag.

If he had tried to do this in a roundabout way, maybe he could have escaped in a peaceful manner–however, he had nary a single regret.

Even if such a moment happened again, he would definitely do the same thing–no, he mighteven kick the other guy once.

–Right, if they ever dare do anything to RyuZU, I'll do anything to protect her–

The men's faces were contorted in rage, intending to grab Naoto.

And Naoto bit his lips as he glared back.

Immediately,

"…Master Naoto, thank you very much."

A refreshing voice could be heard.

"–My understanding of you has improved by a notch."

"Eh?"

Naoto inadvertently asked back.

And so, the hem of RyuZU's skirt fluttered slightly.

That was all Naoto's naked eyes could identify.

However, the gusts and sounds seemed to have 'something' to them as they raced forward, seeming stroking the 3 men.

This was followed by a weird sound.

The men's shirts, pants, accessories, shoes, underwear, and even their hair was dissoluted like there was an intricate magic trick.

"–I am really sorry."

RyuZu lifted the hem of her skirt as she bowed at the trio, now naked and lying on the ground,

"I was already in an unpleasant mood due to those unruly people's attitudes towards Master Naoto, so I couldn't help but take action. I have no intention on reflecting on this however."

"Ah, erm, ah…"

“As for your just rewards, you shall be glad that you never laid a hand upon Master Naoto. No matter what kind of pervert Master Naoto is, I do not think he will be pleased to see severed heads.”

RyuZU showed a thin smile on her face.

But her expression was absolute zero, ostensibly staring at flies on rotting flesh.

No matter how unhinged a person was, clearly he would understand what she was trying to get at.

The naked trio scampered like wild dogs, and the commotion get bigger as yelps could be heard, along with the distinct bellows of policemen.

“…O-Okay now, let’s hurry into the manga cafe. It’s too dangerous to go outside in the night, RyuZU!”

Naoto hurriedly pushed RyuZU in the back as he hurried into the shop.

He was a regular customer at this manga cafe.

The shop was wide and bright, completely clean within. The facilities were also well maintained, and the beverage bar had a wide assortment of choices.

RyuZU stopped, and looked around.

“…It’s decent, i guess.”

She pouted unhappily.

“But I do think the environment in “The Uh-Huh” is better. Master Naoto, do you prefer a cramped room instead of a wide comfortable place?”

“Ugh, let’s not talk about it anymore. Forget about it, okay?”

The duo approached the reception area, and a young male attendant walked out from the interior. Upon seeing RyuZU for the first time, he was momentarily stunned, but immediately greeted her with a smile, ostensibly a change in mood.

“W-Welcome. Do you have a membership card?”

Naoto handed his member card.

“I want the night package.”

“If you start now, you’ll have to pay for approximately 1 hour worth of normal rates. Is this okay?”

“Sure. I’ll have that please.”

“Thank you for your patronage. What kind of suite do you want?”

For that instant, Naoto did not know how to respond.

He was looking troubled as he stared at the interior map the shop attendant had handed him. There were cafeteria suites, box suites, business suites, reclining suites…an assortment of suites, but considering that two people had to stay together…

While Naoto was being fickle over this, RyuZU took a step forward from beside.

“Please give us a couple suite.”

“Eh…?”

“Understood. The 4th suite then.”

RyuZU ignored Naoto while the latter remained shocked, and simply finished the procedures swiftly before receiving the card and receipt.

“Wait RyuZU!? What’s the couple suite?”

“Isn’t that what you were aiming for, Master Naoto? I can tell that you have perverse thoughts of embracing me passionately in tight corners inside of lying in a wide room. Aren’t you very grateful for my insightfulness?”

“That’s not it! I never thought of that!”

“Using such considerations, I thus have a suitable explanation as to why you’re refusing to enter a love hotel so stubbornly.”

“I’m still underaged!”

“Do be assured, Master Naoto, no matter the unique desires you have that will never be accepted by society, I shall accept them all

without exception."

"I say–no, never mind. It's safer if I think about it."

"Yes. It does seem that the security here isn't too good. Though there won't be any issues with me around, it is important to avoid danger."

"Ah, yeah…"

Avoiding danger for the other guys, anyway, Naoto murmured.

–If some idiot is to tease RyuZU in the shop, there'll be homicide…!

Once they entered the designated suite, Naoto collapsed onto the sofa immediately.

"…Th-This is a long time…"

His body was completely lethargic, feeling like lead

If this is to keep up, I'll be sleeping like a bag of dirt. Can't do this. Naoto took a deep breath to empower himself, and slowly got to his feet.

"Master Naoto, where are you going?"

"I'm going to use the shower. I won't feel good sleeping like this when I'm all sweaty."

"I see. Understood."

Naoto passed by RyuZU while the latter had her head lowered, and went straight for the bathroom.

But soon after walking off, he stopped and turned around.

And then, he asked RyuZU, who was staring at him blankly,

"I say, why must you follow me?"

"…? Didn't you order me to scrub your back?"

"I never said anything!"

"Really? But it seems that you aren't that willing to be honest with your desires, Master Naoto. Because of that, I'm trying to interpret the true hidden intent within your words."

“It’s fine even if you don’t try to interpret them!”

“…Really? Alright then? Did you not wish for me to remove your clothes in such a tight space and provide special service with liquid soap and sponge?”

“…”

“Master Naoto?”

“…It’s fine. No need for that. I’ll bath alone.”

“Understood. I shall return to my seat and await your return.”

“…Yeah. See you later.”

RyuZU bowed and returned back to her seat

Once she had completely disappeared from his sights, Naoto inadvertently fell on his knees.

He wiped the tears off his eyes, muttering to himself,

“…What was I doing…?”

●●●

“Wah!? What’s this!?”

After having taken a shower, Naoto returned to the couple suite feeling all refreshed, only to find all sorts of magazines and mangas stacked within.

RyuZU, seated on the sofa, was browsing through the pages at an alarming rate.

She stopped for flipping for the time being, and stared at Naoto.

“Welcome back, Master Naoto.”

“Ah, yeah, I’m back…what’re you doing?”

“This is part of intelligence gathering. My mechanical functions

have ceas for 206 years, so I do feel it is necessary for me to replenish on modern intelligence as much as possible."

"…Including these mangas?"

"Popular entertainment are important elements for references."

"I-Is that so…I'm tired. I'll sleep then."

"Nn, good night then."

After that, RyuZU sat in a Seiza position, facing Naoto.

Naoto sat beside her, and said,

"RyuZU…you don't need to sleep because you're an automata. What about your spring?"

"Please do not worry. It is wounded automatically."

"Oh, I see…eh, wounded automatically? Even with more than 4 trillion gears inside?'

"Yes. And?"

Naoto took a deep breath, and nodded,

"–No, well. It's strange if I can't do that much."

Even the latest generation of automata had be be winded once a week…Naoto again realized the high specifications RyuZU had. A mere spring activation function was nothing compared to the capabilities she had shown till this point…

After convincing himself this, Naoto rested upon his arm, and closed his eyes.

And then, RyuZU's stoic tone could be heard.

"–Are you ignoring me?"

"Eh?"

Naoto inadvertently opened his eyes.

He saw RyuZU's extremely displeased look several inches away from him, and gasped.

“Are you ignoring my lap pillow?”

She patted her thighs as she said.

Naoto widened his eyes, and asked,

“…Really?”

“We did it during lunch break in the day. You are now my master, Master Naoto. Is there anything inconvenient about that?”

“No, no problems at all.”

He quickly replied, and laid his head gently on her thigh.

The soft, warm sensation ostensibly made him feel as if he was melting within, and he exhaled slightly, curled his little boy on the sofa, and once he closed his eyes, and somnolence set in.

“Master Naoto.”

“Hm?”

“I’ve been watching you today.”

“Yeah.”

“Allow me to be frank, you are a thoroughly enigmatic person.”

“Maybe. I don’t deny it.”

“Yes. Also, I think you are being too humble.”

Ah, Naoto snorted unhappily.

“Sorry…for meeting such a lousy owner.”

“–It is correct that knowing humility is extremely important… but…”

Naoto was prepared to listen intently regarding the rest.

“…Never mind. Nothing major–good night.”

“…Yeah.”

Naoto soon fell into a deep sleep.

RyuZU stroked his hair gently as she whispered,

“…How exactly does Master Naoto see me?”

There was no reply.

RyuZU too did not hope for an answer.

Through this observation she had for the entire day, she could be certain that he only had interest in robots.

In that case, what he wished from this peerless automata was simply an outstanding machine.

But if that was the case, why did he treat her like a human girl?

“It’s, really hard to understand.”

RyuZU smiled bitterly, lowered her stare, and recalled the scuffle just now.

She could not tell whether Naoto was treating her as his possession or as a girl, but he certainly intended to protect her.

…*He really treasures me.*

That was the only thing she was certain of, and it was enough.

RyuZU smiled, not showing any malicious intent as she continued to comb Naoto's hair.

●●●

It had been 26 hours from the moment the entire staff began

analyzing.

The analysis was progressing successfully.

They had confirmed the status of the 2nd level of this 27 level core tower.

Unfortunately, they had yet to find out where the issue was. If they were to progress at this rate however, they could finish analyzing all the levels in around 2 weeks.

Even though they had obtained such reasons–Marie could not bring herself to be really happy.

"…Things are going too smoothly."

Right, this was the strange part.

If they could proceed with their work smoothly, a simple way of summarizing things was that, 'Nobody was obstructing them'.

The ones obstructing would be the 'military'.

Of course, due to the clauses in the agreements. The 'military' could not obstruct brazenly, and could at most request to 'assist'; the 'Meister Guild' would then express their thanks regarding such requests, and refuse so as to be able to finish their work successfully. However, the 'military' had developed an ego, for they had been maintaining the daily functions of the city as caretakers, and would not treat any 'outsider' too kindly for barging in on their work. They had to maintain a reputation to the city residents.

In the end, the 'military' would use classified information or responsibility as a shield to interfere with the 'Guild' work. The 'Guild' would finish their work while trying to avoid the 'military'.

To the 'military', the 'Guild' were simply vultures hoping to snatch their jobs and get the accomplishments.

To the 'Guild', the 'military' was simply an incompetent organization full of hot air.

That had been the organization Marie and the rest faced till this point. However–

"We only saw a few Technical Forces members today."

They were not unconcerned.

They made a ‘request’ the moment Marie’s group arrived, and at this point, there was a Technical Force member acting as supervisor, watching their actions silently.

That was all however.

After she had refused their request to assist, they simply fell back. This core tower, located at the heart of the city, would typically have more than a thousand staff members, but they left without any further questioning.

Though Marie’s group knew that it was something good, there was something scary about it.

The ‘Guild’ could not decipher their intentions.

There was a sudden gravitational change before dawn broke.

The ‘military’ responded strangely.

Though it seemed to be a small single anomaly, the ‘worst case scenario’ appeared in Marie’s mind once she linked everything together.

“This might be…maybe it is.”

“Meister Marie…”

A young staff member whispered to her.

Once she understood the intentions written on his face, she nodded.

“I know. Don’t worry, I’m already prepared.”

“Then, as expected…?”

“We still can’t be sure of this yet, but I suppose we’ll soon have a result.”

Marie’s expression was clearly faltering as she answered, and once the man noticed this, he cleared his throat and returned back to his position.

“–Okay.”

Marie took a deep breath, and returned to the elevator shaft with steady steps.

The Technical Force supervisor silently followed.

He was probably the superintendent of this facility, and on his sturdy chest, befitting of a soldier, was the insignia of a Gazelle.

As they waited for the elevator shaft, Marie said to the man.

“I intend to go take a breather outside. You won’t mind, right?”

“Go ahead.”

His reply was cold.

Marie however did not mind, and at that instant, the elevator arrived. She walked in, and pressed the button leading to the ground.

Her team was working at a position approximately 8,200m deep below the city area; in other words, the 3rd level. Even when taking the elevator ride proceeding at 1km every second, it would take them about 8 minutes to reach the surface.

During that time, Marie stared at the depth meter on the door. Soon after, it seemed she was finally unable to endure this silence any longer as she turned to say,

“That gun’s the BR-19, right?”

She started the conversation with a cheery tone.

She was staring at pistol on the man’s waist, and the latter did not answer as he stood still. Marie did not mind about his response either as she continued.

“The gun doesn’t fire a bullet through the spinning of the gears, but through the compression and release of the rapid moving air. It has more recoil than any of the previous guns, but uses this recoil to amplify the compression ability of the next shot, which results in it possessing outstanding stopping power. It is normally loaded with 7 shots, and there is a wire meant to prevent any enemy from stealing. The huh, isn’t it the .45? If firepower is of the priority, wouldn’t the short assault rifle BR-sp33 be a more convenient choice?’

As Marie prattled on as she explained this ‘military’ standard weapon, the man could only show surprise at this.

“You understand quite a lot there.”

“Yes. My family does manufacture guns.”

“–Oh, I see. You’re the Princess of the Breguet Company.”

“Do you know? Those born in the Breguet family are taught specific details regarding the product designs and sales. As one of the 5 Great Enterprises, it sells everything from baby cots to large transport carriers. It’s really…”

“Sounds tough.”

“Yeah. I suffered quite a bit when I was young.”

“But to be honest, I really don’t understand the meaning behind that. Unless you’re an employee, is it really necessary for the Princess to learn all this?”

There was a mocking tone within these words.

But Marie smiled, looking as if she agreed with him.

“You think so too?”

“Yeah. I think it’s too much. If you have the time, why not learn some other valuable things?”

“Right. Like this?”

“Huh? Ack–!!?”

The instant the man spoke up, he was sent sprawling on the floor.

“Ah, ugh, ummm…!?”

–He had no idea what hit him.

Even though he was a technician, he would have to accept combat training as part of the military. He was not of the actual combat team, but he would have learnt combat techniques that would allow him to deal with 2, 3 hoodlums.

However, he was subdued by a 16-year-old girl, stripped of his

weapon, stepped upon, and had a gun pointed at the back of his head, all these without a chance to fight back at that instant. What exactly was the situation?

“I said it already, didn’t I? I’ve been indoctrinated with all sorts of ‘specific details’ regarding our products. That will include ‘the way to use them’, right? –Will you please be quiet for a while?

“Wh-Wha-what are you doing, you–ugh!?”

“Hey, didn’t I tell you to be quiet, **dog**?”

Marie spoke condescendingly.

It sounded completely natural, she was neither excited nor nervous.

These words, coupled with the feeling of the gun pointed at the back of the man’s head, eroded his will to resist.

The elevator shaft arrived at the surface.

The doors were opened along with the sound of air being exhausted. Standing in front of them was a hulking giant–Halter.

He peered inside, and patted his bald head.

And then, he spoke to the man Marie was stepping on sympathetically.

“You really suffered there. Well, just think of it as being bitten by a dog–”

“Stop yapping and hurry inside.”

“Right right. Pardon me.”

Once Halter entered the elevator, he pressed the descending button. It again sank below the ground, and after 10 seconds or so, was stopped forcefully.

While the elevator became a locked room, Halter tied the man’s limbs.

The man continued to struggle at this point, but a body of flesh and blood was powerless against the cyborg Halter, and he fell onto the floor, restrained.

Marie stepped on the man's head.

"How about we make cries in all sorts of places?"

"–Ugh…"

The man still tried to struggle, but Marie would not budge her foot away from his head.

She smirked as she watched him in this state.

"Oh my, what is this now? You still intend to struggle? You look very delighted struggling like this, you pervert."

"You seem to be in a good mood, Milady."

"I loved to train dogs when I was young. Any large and stubborn dog would become cute and whimper whenever I leash them in the end."

Just like this–Marie said as she grabbed the man by the collar, and the latter could only groan as he struggled with his head stomped on, his tie pulled.

"Speaking of which, did you bring the toy here, Halter?"

"Hm, I did…are you really going to use it?"

Halter frisked out a white syringe unwillingly.

There was a silver liquid of unknown nature.

Upon seeing this, the man's face was contorted with fear.

"Wha…w-wait a sec! What's that!? What're you trying to inject me with!?"

"What exactly? Well, of course it's a truth serum–"

"Wha–"

"–if only. We just so happened not to have it. Think about it, we're just ordinary citizens after all."

"What kind of ordinary citizens will act like you!?"

The man hollered.

He said something anyone would wholeheartedly agree in anguish, but Marie did not respond to his topic as she continued to grin.

“Actually, it’s mercury.”

“Mer-Mercury!?”

The man’s eyes widened as he gasped.

“Yeah. It’s the kind used for automata maintenance.”

“A-Are you, serious!? If you really inject that”

“You’ll die, right?”

Marie gave a cheshire grin.

“So what? It’s nothing amazing, isn’t it?”

“…”

The man’s face paled. His lips were tightened, and tears could be seen in his eyes. His limbs were tied tightly, and he was sweating profusely all over.

“Then, let’s decide the rules now, okay? I’m the master, you’re the dog. Answer with a woof no matter what question it is. How about it? Simple right?”

“Do-Don’t think you can get away with it–ack!”

Marie stomped on the man’s face hard.

“Hey, you should be woofing, right? Why don’t you understand such simple instructions? Are you making fun of me?”

“Th-This damned brat…!”

“Are you really hoping that I splatter that pitiful brain of yours? A mere nameless mook still dares to defy me? Know your place, mongrel.”

“Okay now, Milady, we’re getting off topic here.”

Halter spoke admonishingly.

He spoke in a friendly, compassionate tone to the man who was

teary and bloodied on the nose,

“I’d say, bro, that Milady might be enjoying things now, but I’m different. I just want to ask about something. If you can tell me honestly, I’ll release you immediately. It’s a promise.”

“U…uu..”

“There’re two things I want to ask about, so listen up? ‘Where exactly is the anomaly occurring’, and ‘how much has the ‘military’ understood about the situation. Can you please tell me?”

“I-I can’t. I can’t say it.”

The man stared at Halter in the eyes, and shook his head timidly.

“I say, bro, don’t add on to my workload, will you?”

“I’ll be killed if I say it!”

“You rather let that Princess toy you to death?”

Halter raised his chin, and Marie readied her syringe delightedly.

“Here’s an advice. That Princess a real Sadist, you know? The female nobles born in France do seriously treat civilian males as mongrels.”

“I-I can’t do it.”

“Bro.”

“If I tell you that, my family that has escaped from the city will be killed by the ‘military’ too!!”

The man hollered as he sobbed,

“Da-Damn it! Just kill me already! I won’t say anything!”

“Hey, calm down bro–no, I should call you Mr Ryoji Nijama.”

“Wha…?”

The man was stunned to suddenly hear his name.

How does he know my name–the instant he shuddered, Halter smiled as he handed something to the former.

It was a small white plastic plate.

An ID card.

“!?”

“You just blurted out that they have already ‘escaped from the city’, right? Currently, there’ only a Nijima family that was originally from this city and has already left…we can confirm it in 15 minutes.”

“Halter, this guy’s useless. Just eliminate him already and switch to the next target. Ah right, don’t forget to kill his family in an accident or something.”

Marie commanded in an arrogant manner.

Halter shrugged, and placed the gun barrel upon the man’s temple.

“That’s how it is–sorry.”

“Wai-Wait! I understand! I’ll talk! I’ll say everything!”

“Everything?”

“Please let me say this, please…”

“Very good.”

Marie stared at this sobbing man with a cold look, and said,

“First question. Where’s the anomaly at.”

“At-At the 24th level.”

“The 24th…it’s rather deep. If I remember correctly, it’s where the air pressure and gravity controls are at, right?”

“Tha-that’s right…there’s a fatal malfunction in the air pressure control core…”

“Very good. You’ve become rather obedient–then, how much has the ‘military’ known?”

“We-Well…”

“There’s no need to ask, Milady.”

Halter said.

“They probably understood everything, and gave up on repairs before this. Though they knew where the all the anomalies are, they won’t provide any information, and even deployed their technicians away. That’s basically what happened, right?”

The man remained silent.

His attitude was the biggest proof.

“Oh…I see. In other words, our job is to save this city with 20 million people that the ‘military’ has given up on.”

“Ha–”

The instant Marie nodded and said this, the man chuckled, and sneered,

“Hahahaha! Try repairing it if you can.”

“–Oh, you’re being arrogant there, huh. Now you’re raising your nose once I treat you a little better. Don’t you know how to learn? Useless dog.”

“Ha–hahahahaha! There’s no way you can repair it!”

“Don’t lump us outstanding technicians with you incapable ones, okay?”

“Humph…I don’t know what kind of big shots you are, but there’s no time for that!”

“…What do you mean!?”

“Exactly what I said! This city’s going to be ‘purged’. 42 hours later!”

–‘Purged’.

This is to deliberately–collapse the city.

If the malfunctioning city could not be repaired, the entire city would be thoroughly abandoned to prevent the error from affecting the entire planetary function. This was what they called the ‘Triage’.”

"–Don't spout nonsense here! If you're going to abandon this city 42 hours later, how can you not issue an evacuation order!?"

"We did…long ago to the 'military' and government related personnel."

"!"

Halter grabbed the man by the collar as the latter sneered, bellowing,

"You guys are just going to watch 20 million people die along with the city!?"

"Humph…you guys know more than anyone how many cities were purged due to maintenance failures, and you act all snobbish! The techniques you all are so proud of is basically refined through the sacrifices of many, no?"

"Shut your filthy mouth, you lowlife."

Marie glared at the man, and growled,

"Right, we're not omnipotent. There aren't just one or two cities that are abandoned because we can't save them–even so, we'll try our best until the very end. I don't think we can be compared to the guys who chose to protect themselves and abandoned 20 million people."

"Huh! You're saying that we never tried our best either!? Say it then, what's the reason you appeared here so shamelessly? –Right, we're intending to abandon this city because of stupid reasons, our superiors' pride, the system! The reason why you're here is no different!"

"!"

"What now? I struck the jackpot? 'Meister Guild'? 'Guild of Technicians without Borders'? Pretending to have kindly faces!? Those faces are definitely black if you cut them up! Fess up! Is that rumor true!?"

"…That rumor?"

"Don't play dumb! I'm talking about the rumor where you guys deliberately destroyed a Core Tower and acted like you're the

experts! You guys caused that incident in Amsterdam 2 years ago, right!?”

“_”

Marie swung the syringe down.

The thick sharp needle entered the man’s chest, and he let out a shriek upon seeing this.

“ARGGH! Da-Damn it! You really injected it!? You mad brat!”

“It seems that you’re mistaken. Let me tell you.”

Marie spoke with the gloomy condescending look one would give to an ant,

“What our superiors intentions are, and what we did, none of it will change the fact that you guys, the ‘military’, abandoned 20 million people. There’s no reason to justify it.”

Shut up, you murderer…!”

“Also, stop being so petty with those filthy thoughts of yours. We’ll definitely save this city, this city the ‘military’ abandoned!”

“Ha, hahaha! Stop bluffing! There’s only 42 hours!? There’s no way you can repair it even with a hundred times of that time!”

“At that moment, I’ll just die along with this city.”

“What…?”

Marie looked away from the panting man, and said to Halter,

“There’s no time–let’s go.”

“Understood. What do we do with him?”

“Just do something. How about you throw him in the lowest level and let him die there?”

“Yo-You! That’s not what we agreed on! Hand me the antidote!”

“He’s just a useless dog we have to deal with in the end. There’s no need for him anyway, right?”

“A-Ahhh! Damn it! You intended this right from the beginning, right!? What genius, you bastard! Go and die, you slut!”

Halter’s sent a punch deep into his solar plexus.

The man winced in pain, and passed out. Marie merely watched on, and murmured,

“…He’s a Gazelle and he can’t distinguish between machine mercury and nanogear preserving liquid? I can’t believe such a person is in charge of maintenance.”

“It is harmless to humans after all, but there’s no reason to use it unless the human is made into a cyborg.”

Halter carried the unconscious man on his shoulder as he stood up. He activated the stopped elevator again, and spoke to a frozen looking Marie,

“You alright? You look tired.”

“It’s nothing. This isn’t much.”

Marie lowered her head as she answered.

She took a candy from her coat pocket, and stuffed it into her mouth.

“Leaving aside my matters, Halter, negotiate with the Breguet Family under my name to protect his family.”

“Understood.”

“Also, check on what the ‘Meister Guild’ intentions are in sending us here, as soon as possible.”

“I’ll try. Anything else?”

“Can you buy me some chocolate. Those sweet ones with caramel inside.”

“Hey, you’ll grow fat, you know?”

“Stop yapping. Buy me an entire box so that I can fill my stomach.”

She chewed on the candy and lifted her head,

“There’s no time for any meals.”

●●●

After hurrying to the workplace on the 3rd level, Marie shouted without even gasping for breath.

“Everyone, please stop and listen to me!”

The staff members who were at work lifted their heads at Marie, trying to understand the situation.

Marie scanned around at everyone’s expressions, and said,

“We’ve confirmed the location of the anomaly! The air pressure containment in the 24th level is malfunctioning! Everyone’s to move out immediately! Those arriving first are to hurry with the observations!”

The staff workers widened their eyes in shock, but got ready to leave immediately. The hall was buzzing, and the Technical Forces members standing in a corner were giving confused looks.

The mechanic chief Conrad appeared beside Marie without her knowledge,

“–That’s amazing, Meister Marie. How did you do that?”

“I just made a heartfelt ‘request’.”

“Oh, I see. Don’t force yourself too much.”

Chief Mechanic Conrad merely grimaced in a reproving manner, but Marie did not continue from this,

“Let’s not talk about this. We got to hurry–there’s only 42 hours left.”

These words caused the observation team to shout,

“What!? We can’t do anything in 42 hours!?”

“Even if we know where the anomaly is, it’ll take us at least a week

to investigate the details of the error and test out all sorts of repair methods!"

"Do you want to scamper away instead?"

Green flames could be seen blazing in Marie's eyes as she stared at her staff team.

"The 'military' has given up on repairing this place, and this city is to be purged. The unknowingly citizens are abandoned."

"What…!?"

"Impossible! There must be a mistake–"

"No, wait, those guys might really do that! It's the 'military'!"

Marie's rage had infected all the staff workers present, and the Technical Force personnel scampered away the instant they were basked amidst the dozens of scathing looks.

Marie clapped a few times, and yelled,

"If it really comes to that, I'll be in charge of announcing the final evacuation. Let's hurry first. We can't wait a single second from now on!"

After this, they were moving at breakneck speed.

In 5 mere minutes, all the scattered equipment and large amounts of data documents were taken away.

Once the last worker left, Marie again scanned the now empty hall, and sighed hard.

She leaned her back on the wall, and slowly fell to the floor, cupping her knees together as she put her forehead on it.

Her arms were trembling.

The sensation of the syringe injecting lingered in her hand.

The sensation of the pistol, the softness of stepping on someone, the man's vengeful words, everything

–I thought I could do everything.

As long as she gave the order, Halter would most likely take charge; this was his previous profession. However, she did not do so, for if it were her older sister, she would act without hesitation once she felt she had to do so. It was because she had to take action that she felt she had to act on her own will, at least by her own hands.

It was because of this thinking that she made the 'inquiry' just now–

But in the end, it was all a mess.

Injecting that syringe was an overboard on her part.

It was a meaningless action, merely meant to sweep aside the frustration. She merely enacted this violence based on her own emotions.

It was the anger against those with the responsibility to save 20 million lives, and who abandoned it.

And also…

"42 hours to repair it–? **Impossible**…how many trillion parts do you think are in there?"

It was her anger at herself, who bore the same responsibility as those people did, and tried to run away like them.

Her lips were trembling.

"Oh God…"

Marie never believed in God, or at least, she never believed in celestial entities created by humanity that were given names. She always believed in the rationality and knowledge of humanity.

But even with that, she experienced this sudden revelation, done when her mind was running at its limit, a mere meshing of small gears. She believed that on the other spectrum of the highly sensitive logic and spirit, there was an amazing existence humanity could not quantify.

She slowly lift her head, and stood upright.

"–I got to go…anyway, I can't waste a single second now."

For the grace of fate would only descend upon those who gave their all.

She wiped away something seeping from her eyes, and proceeded to the 24th level as well.

Chapter 3 – Conflict (11:45)

“How did it end up like this?”

On a weekend afternoon, the pair was seated in a hamburger shop.

RyuZU said to Naoto, who was looking extremely frail, prone on the table.

“Master Naoto, do you know what the saying ‘clothes make the man’ is all about?”

“Yeah, I do. I just feel that you have some malicious intent saying this to me.”

Naoto groaned; his attire was completely different from before..

The uniform he kept using was swapped for a denim half-pants and black checkered shirt, and his cheap, worn-out sneakers were swapped for black leather shoes. Simple, yet fashionable.

His messy hair had now become refreshingly short with a little curl at the end.

He currently resembled one of ‘those popular people’, someone that could fit in amongst the high achievers.

…At least he looked like one.

“I thought something happened because you told me to wake up so early in the morning…you dragged me to the barber, and to everywhere for half a day. Now I’m really tired…”

“Master Naoto, that was a beauty salon, not a barber.”What’s the difference? *Naoto lifted his head.*

RyuZU, seated opposite him, garnered lots of attentions from the onlookers.

Well, this is to be expected. Naoto thought.

RyuZU was so ‘unhumanly beautiful’.

Her clear, glossy silver hair was swaying slightly, a pair of glittering

golden eyes on her snowy speckless face, and her tender body as fleeting as an angel's.

However, RyuZU paid these admiring looks no heed as she said,

"Please pardon me, Master Naoto, but it is merely a basic etiquette. I really cannot rate you when your painstakingly shabby appearance is coupled with that usual unchanging uniform."

"Where did the painstakingly part come in…?"

Naoto sighed.

Well, it's reasonable after all. It'll be bad if I go around at night in uniform…and it's not a bad thing to go to Shimamura and Unilock I always go to–"

"Master Naoto, if you wish to wear Shimumara or Unilock clothing, you have to have the face and presence."

"Do-Don't talk about my face…"

RyuZU ignored the shivering Naoto as she continued,

"If one with a regrettable appearance is to simply mix and match his attire, his appearance, tastes and even his monetary scene will be in doubt, and what he cannot hide will be harder to do so. I have to say however that such a paltry challenge does reeks of sacredness."

"…RyuZU, how do you know all these even after 200 years in stasis? Did you investigate that in the manga cafe or something?"

"Yes, that is partly the reason. However, they are brands that existed since a thousand years ago, and their operations had yet to vary much while I was in stasis."

"Eh…so they already had such recognition since 1000 years ago?"

Naoto nodded, but suddenly tilted his head.

"Speaking of which, it may be a little late, but we were quite generous with the spending on the clothing and hairstyling. How did you settle the money issues?"

"I raised some money."

RyuZU answered stoically, and Naoto frowned, asking,

“–In detail?”

RyuZU merely answered with a clear captivating smile, and handed over Naoto’s bank book.

…Speaking of which, I never asked for it back.

Naoto remembered the bankbook, which he had forgotten for quite a while, and flipped it open.

“_”

And so, he was stunned.

There were 1, 2, 3…many zeros in there.

“Mi-Mi-Mi-Mi-Mi-Mi-Mi-Mi-Miss, RyuZU?”

“Master Naoto, no matter how amazed you are at how capable this ultimate automata can be, you do not have to praise me with such a musical tone.”

“That’s not it! Speaking of which, eh, wait, is this real? Eh? Why…?”

Naoto was in such a frenzy that he was unable to articulate himself.

RyuZU stared at him in condolence, and said,

“Do rest assured, Master Naoto. The police will not pursue this matter.”

“No, this explanation makes it more unnerving.”

Naoto narrowed his eyes, and asked,

“Honestly, how did you do it?”

“It was without your permission, Master Naoto, but I made use of the negligible assets you had left.”

“Made use…and you got it to this extent?”

“Credit economy, to put it in radical terms, is the creation of wealth from nothingness. If one has the knowledge and the wisdom to use

this knowledge, such a paltry sum is a cinch."

–That's definitely impossible.

Naoto thought, but if he were to pursue matters further, he would come across some truths he would not want to know of, and decided to remain silent.

RyuZU showed an angelic smile as she said,

"As you can see, all financial concerns are dealt with. In the future, all of your food consumption, fashion and minimal culture-related expenses shall be paid off by me, so you simply have to enjoy the lifestyle of a tagalong–pardon me, a lifestyle of elegance."

"…Did you just say tagalong?"

"That is not the case. Even if the savings increase on a 100-fold ratio, the money is all yours, Master Naoto, so they are your personal fortune. You will be simply squandering your own fortunes, so there is no need to call yourself a tagalong."

Naoto lowered his head dejectedly.

…A tagalong. Am I a tagalong?

…And this tagalong is not taken care of by a woman he wooed, but an automata.

RyuZU, looking down from above him, continued to pummel him verbally,

"Perhaps if you had not fallen into such a dire state, Master Naoto, or to be precise, if you had a usable money note in your wallet at least, I would not have to resort to such means."

"That's not it! I did have some! I just need to withdraw some money!"

"If you had done that, your savings would be gone the instance you stepped into the salon."

"It's weird that I had to spend that much money in the salon, right!? It'll grow longer anyway!"

"These are necessary expenses."

RyuZU said.

“–Despite you being poor, small, short, a capitalist struggling in poverty, and a martyr for democracy, if you cannot maintain a basic level of class, Master, I as your servant will have my standards doubted.”

…*I see,* Naoto nodded.

It was true that after RyuZU, countless stares would be upon him on the streets or in the shops.

–They would be wondering, *why him?*“I see. Right, I understand now. I’ll take note so that you won’t be shamed, RyuZU.”

“–It is also a gift for what happened before.”

“Gift? Did I do anything you need to thank for?”

“If you do not remember, please forget about what I just said.”

And so, the duo left the hamburger shop and head for the train station. On the streets, Naoto found a beautifully decorated clothing shop targeted at young girls, and stopped in his tracks.

He stared at a certain frilly dress showcased behind the display window.

“RyuZU, wait a moment.”

“…Master Naoto, if you have any interest in female clothing, please inform me beforehand. When choosing clothes–”

“That’s not it!!? Alright already, come here.”

Naoto dragged the the venomous-tongued RyuZU into the shop.

“Welcome–wow!”

The shop attendant inside, upon seeing RyuZU, was left astounded.

Naoto was already used to such a reaction, and did not pay particular heed as he went for the mannikin at the display window to check the price.”

“…RyuZU, will you mind trying this one?”

“You wish for me to strip here? Alright, there is no problems. It is my duty to answer my Master’s–”

“Don’t twist what I said like that! Go to the changing room! Sorry, we’ll like to try this dress.”

“Eh!? Ah, y-yes! Please wait.”

The shop attendant, completely mesmerized by RyuZU, recovered upon hearing Naoto’s words and reacted.

RyuZU watched on, feeling suspicious as she said,

“…What do you mean?”

“It’s nothing. Hurry. Put it on.”

“Are you saying that you are unsatisfied with my usual attire?”

RyuZU said as she spread her arms out.

Right–RyuZU’s now wearing a uniform, but she’s was wearing another dress at first.

It’s a classic dress with frills and laces on it, like it was weaving the night sky.

She probably won’t mind about her own clothing–

Naoto saw the attendant return with the clothing in tow, and laughed,

“I think that’s good too. Just don’t think too much and try it on.”

“…Acknowledged.”

RyuZU looked unwilling as she entered the changing room.

Soon after,

“–Is this al*right?*”

The curtain was pulled aside.

The attendant, who came over to peek, was left gobsmacked by RyuZU’s attire.

The silky glossy white camisole was matched with a layered pink miniskirt and a pink shawl. Every piece of clothing was thin and soft, like a sugar snack with intricate packaging.

“Yes, it really suits you!”

Naoto broke into an agitated grin, and RyuZU could only say with a troubled look,

“…Is that so? I did assume that this attire is not suited for a

follower.”

“That’s not true at all. You’re the best, Miss RyuZU!”

“But if I am to walk alongside you in this attire, Master Naoto, instead of a follower…no, it is nothing. Anyway, I will like you to explain this to me.”

“Explain what? That I’m making you wear this?”

“If I am to ask you to explain other matters, Master Naoto, my thinking ability will be similar to yours.”

“Because I’m happy. It’s like a date.”

Due to Naoto’s serious answer, RyuZU gave a bitter grimace.

“……Master Naoto, do you normally think of bringing a clock around as ‘a date with a clock’? This is truly a refreshing and very profound expression.”

“Hm? You’re the strange one for saying this, RyuZU. You’re not a clock either.”

“Then, what am I?”

RyuZU tilted her head slightly, and let out a brief sigh.

“What am I to you, Master Naoto?”

“A super cute automata girl.”

RyuZU widened her eyes at Naoto’s direct answer.

“…Cute, is it?”

“Yes! I don’t have any fashion sense when it comes to myself, but I do have quite the talent in appraising automata! I can say that you’re the cutest automata in the universe, RyuZU!”

“…How can you say that I am number 1 when there is no comparison–”

“It’s obvious!”

Naoto concluded without hesitation,

“Ah, but I really want to play around with this hair. It’s so beautiful after all.”

And then, he seemed to notice something as he reached his hand out for RyuZU’s hair, looking interested.

“Ah!”

Do to the difference in height, Naoto tripped on the step within the changing room when he reached for her hair.

He hurriedly tried to grab the curtain, only for it to slip out from his hand, and fell towards RyuZU’s chest within the changing room.

RyuZU, who was pushed down and had her chest buried, spoke indifferently,

“…I see. You have already planned matters to such an extent. I do give up major props for that, for I have to admit that your meticulous plans for sexual harassment is beyond my expectations.”

“What!? That wasn’t what I had in mind!”

RyuZU continued to give an icy stare at Naoto, who lifted his head in a panic.

“So the creatures known as humans are only able to break through their limits when looking for uncouth things like eros?”

“No, that…ah–uu–I can’t deny that though…”

“–Then, what do you intend to do next?”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“Deliberately pulling the curtain down, pushing me into a locked room, and watching my chest parts with such enjoyment to a point of panting. Are you going to simply pass this off as a ‘coincidence’?”

“Well, do you mean I can’t do that?”

“Yes you cannot.”

RyuZU sighed.

“…Well, never mind. Since you wasted all of your negligible intelligence to seize the initiative upon me, I as the follower will

have to express my respect at that–do say it, what is your wish?"

"Eh? I can make a request?"

At that moment, that ability to go beyond humanity's limits, which RyuZU had just mentioned, was running at full throttle within him, endless troubles lingering in his mind.

There was only one best choice amongst all the wishes.

–To be honest, men are really helpless.

"Th-Then…how about you allow me to strip you?"

Naoto's fingers were twitching as he approached RyuZU.

●●●

She was troubled.

She was working in a clothing shop targeted at young girls.

Though her friends have said she was like a college girl, she was not here as a part-timer. She was actually the shop owner, and all the products displayed within this shop were chosen by her after much deliberation, each product being something she was proud of.

The products in the shop were basically artistic, of the sweet loli, white loli, goth loli, covered with laces and frills, a stark contrast from those cheap cosplay knockoffs.

They were all products she scouted and picked personally to her liking.

The loli-styled of clothing was originally a fanatical imagination of expressing one's cuteness and innocence to a point of head over heels–and when talking about this, she would show no restraint as she poured all her love and the best possible goods into this shop.

Just before this, a couple entered this shop she was so proud of. One of them was a super beautiful girl even a model would feel inferior to, and the other was a boy who was considered cute after some dolling up.

On the boy's behest, she took the clothing that was to be tried on, and once the beautiful girl showed such flawless get-up, even she was amazed, letting out an unprofessional sigh. She was wondering, ah, yes, I'm looking for clothes for this girl, right–

…However.

The duo was acting strangely, and the instance she was wondering why there was a ruckus at the changing room, she saw the boy enter the room the girl was in, and they never came out after that.

She was overly concerned, and tried to approach, only to hear erratic breathing!

"–I cannot remove any more."

"No, you still can. Alright, I'm going to remove the last one."

"Ah–"

"Wow…it's like this…I guess it's completely different from the dark places, and I only saw a bit…it's amazing…"

"Master…Naoto. Please do not open–"

"Ah, you're sensitive here. Then, over there…"

"Please…do not touch there."

She was gobsmacked, confused, bewildered.

–What am I supposed to do in such a situation!?

Over the past three years, she became increasingly adept at running this business, but this was the first time she ended up in such a situation.

All the customers she had till now were girls in their teens, and even though there were some who brought their boyfriends along, none of them were so bold as to do that in the changing room.

She placed her hands on her sizzling face, fidgeting about as she mulled over this, recalling the boyfriend she broke up with in college due to an argument. She pursued her dreams and worked hard, never displeased about her current lifestyle. However, she did feel lonely over this bachelorette lifestyle–.

“Ahn–!”

“Alright…it gone in. Wow…amazing, it’s so complicated within.”

–She was seething.

What the heck! This is my shop, one meant for cute Alices to wear frilly dresses and show radiant smiles! What lewd things are you doing in my shop!? Die!

She pulled the curtain to the changing room.

“WHAT ARE YOU TWO–!! Wh-wh-wha?”

Her yell got softer, and finally vanished.

The situation inside the changing room was more chaotic than she assumed.

The half-naked girl had her clothes removed–that was one thing, but what was with those gears exposed from her opened back? And as for the boy, he had a thin and long screwdriver inserted, inspecting the inside with a monocle-type magnifier.

“Ah…n!”

Whenever the boy twisted the screwdriver carefully, the beautiful girl–an automata, would let out an alluring moan and fidget about.

The shopkeeper watched on, dumbfounded, and the boy finally realized her presence as he scratched his head shyly, saying,

“Erm…sorry about that, just a simple maintenance. Ah, I’m buying this clothing. How much is it?”

“Just scram, you perverted boy.”

●●●

…How many times has it been?

Marie sighed hard in this temporary meeting room that was originally a storeroom.

All the personnel were mobilized to the 24th level, working overnight, but the problem was yet to be solved.

At this point, they were going through the 5th report and strategy meeting with regards to the repairs.

With Marie leading the group, the leaders of the observation, analysis, mechanic, communication, and information team were gathered along with the freight personnel,all of them unable to hide the fatigue from their faces.

Observation team leader Hannes quickly spoke up.

"–The problem is that we can't determine the cause of this malfunction. We can be certain that the air pressure control installation is functioning abnormally, but the observed values themselves aren't showing any anomaly. We can't assume that the cause is because of the system depreciation or malfunction."

–The butterfly effect.

A small, negligible change that was not worth mentioning would trigger a massive change.

The "Clockwork Planet" had completely replicated the construct of a planet.

This construct was complicated, an enigma, the full appearance of it impossible to be grasped.

Even if there was a mere system malfunction, it was a rarity that changing the system itself would solve the problem. The root of this problem might be a section completely unrelated to the problematic system itself.

Perhaps it was a mere loose screw or a tilted cog.

When such errors pile up one after another, it would sometimes result in a fatal accident.

This was what the observation team leader Hannes was describing.

"Kyoto's city construct system is such that every single level is independent. Of course, this means that there is an anomaly in the 24th level, and the entire observation team can conclude this. However…"

The analysis team leader Massimo then continued.

“According to the results calculated from the observations, there are 563,499,352 possible causes here. It will require us at least a month…no, 2 weeks minimum to confirm the source of the problem…”

Currently, the ‘blueprint’ of the planet was lost, and trying to find the cause of this anomaly was akin to searching for a needle in a haystack.

They had to come up with a full map with no overlapping patterns– check what seemed to be the source of the anomaly, and then test if it had anything to do with it.

It would be fine if there was only one cause. If there were 3 or 4, there would be an infinite number of possibilities.

If one were to think about it, the projected timeframe of 2 weeks team leader Massimo mentioned showed an astounding rate. However, Marie shook her head in anguish.

“We don’t have that much time.”

“But Professor Marie, we don’t have time no matter how we think about this.”

The communications team leader said with a pale face.

“If we can use the current analysis materials as negotiation tools and force the delay of the purge through some political means–”

“That’s worth a shot, but it’s likely impossible. What’s the current situation with the work?”

Marie asked, and the mechanic team leader Conrad answered,

“We’re thinking of limiting the number of possibilities to 35,034 types to hasten the work. Currently, we’re contacting the mechanic and communications team to work together on them.”

“What’s the selection basis?”

“Just by gut instinct.”

Other than the analysis team leader, everyone else rolled their eyes at the mechanic team leader.

However, he merely shrugged and said,

“To put it nicely, we’re eliminating possibilities of the same type and picking out similar records of such incidents up till now. Though we can go by the easy way of testing through the probability of the possibility, we can only rely on our gut feelings in the end.”

Marie asked,

“Is there any hope?”

“Not at all.”

“…”

“But if we don’t do that, we won’t be able to finish all the confirmation works. Looking at the current situation, the issue is whether we can finish verify all 35,000 methods.

“Aren’t there any other ways to go about doing this?”

“Considering our equipment and technology, that’s the limit we can go.”

The mechanic team leader nodded, and the staff in charge of transportation stood up in cold sweat.

“Professor Marie, if we can’t avoid the purge, I think we need to consider a mean to escape.”

Observation team leader Hannes stood up, his expression changed.

“Are you saying that we should just let the purge happen!? This has no difference from what the ‘military’ is doing!”

“I’m also prepared to help with the repair work until the end! But in the face of this current problem, we need to think of the next best plan if there is no hope of succeeding.”

Marie frowned, and asked,

“Do you mean we should send an evacuation notice to the people?”

“Yes. It’s still possible if we start now! Shouldn’t we reveal the information openly to ensure the citizens’ safety?”

“We don’t have such authority, and more importantly, how are we alone going to ensure the evacuation of 20 million people?”

Marie’s calm analysis caused the transport staff to grit his teeth.

–The city you are in will be purged.

Once such information was to be revealed, the chaos that unfolds would be unimaginable.

Nobody could ensure the successful evacuation just by themselves. The forms of transportation that would facilitate their escape would be immobilized in that instant, and there would be citizens unable to move freely.

First, where should they evacuate to? And then?

However, he did not back now as he insisted.

“Of course, there will be danger and chaos, but we should instead consider how to reduce the final number of casualties rather than use materials to try and repair without any hope.

“Perhaps the ‘military’ might even start the purge earlier to hide the truth?”

Mechanic team leader Conrad murmured, ostensibly to himself.

At that instant, the meeting room descended into terrifying silence. Starting from Marie, all the team leaders could not speak up, and the transport staff was trembling, his voice shaking as he panted,

“…That’s impossible.”

“What sort of reason do they need to hesitate? Those guys have already given up on it. It’s just a matter of when they want to do it.”

“This is a city with 20 million people in it!”

“So? Isn’t that the case?”

The mechanic team leader snorted as he continued.

“Do you understand? For us, the worst possible situation is that the city collapses, that 20 million lives will be sacrificed. It’s different for them; those guys are most worried of the revelation to the

public regarding the fact that the ‘military’ purged the city.”

“How’s that–”

“You’re still too young. Right now, the ‘military’ isn’t obstructing us because this is convenient for them.”

“What do you mean, chief mechanic?”

Marie asked, and the mechanic team leader stroked his white beard, sighing hard.

Mechanic team leader Conrad was the oldest Meister amongst all in the room, a highly experienced technician who was going from his prime to his advanced age. He was commonly active on the frontlines from the moment he became a Meister at a young age, and his experience and expertise was widely acknowledged. He originally had the talent to take over Marie as the leader of the entire team, but he did not do so, for he preferred the role of mentoring the younger generation through words and tips.

He gave a reproving look to every young person present, and calmly stated,

“Do you understand? First, what we have to accept is that we can’t possibly repair this city within 10 hours. This is what those guys think, at least, and objectively, it is the fact.”

“But chief mechanic!”

“Alright, calm down, Hannes. I don’t intend to give up at all, but that doesn’t apply for the ‘military’. Those guys have already decided on purging this city, and are ready to go through with it. The problem here is after that; once this city is purged, what will those guys do?”

“What does that mean…?”

“They’ll be highly criticized, right? And they’ll be derided to a point of worthlessness. The dead can’t talk, but since we’re talking about a collapse of the entire city with all its citizens inside, it’s really hard to hide this fact. The heads of the higher-ups might even fly, but considering the level of losses, that’s rather tame–what about us?”

The mechanic team leader looked around at everyone.

In the midst of this silence, Marie spoke up.

“Anyway, it’s a script like ‘we asked the Guild for help, but they were unable to save the lives of the people despite the desperate repairs’, right?”

The mechanic team leader smiled, and said,

“Professor Marie, you really are such a sweet girl.”

“Fuehh?”

Marie exclaimed, completely forgetting to maintain her persona.

With a tender smile on his face, Conrad stared at Marie, and shook his head,

“Unfortunately, this world is filthy to the point of a lost cause. Do you understand? Those guys will likely come up with this script–”

He sighed, and said,

“–They will say, “while we’re carrying out our desperate repairs, the ‘Guild’ forcefully interfered with our work, resulting in a failure, and we were unable to evacuate in time due to the sudden collapse of the city. This is truly most regrettable”.”

———-

At that moment, a loud thud could be heard as the door to the meeting room was opened.

A bald man in black suit walked in–it was Halter.

Basked in the midst of anguished stares, he raised a hand awkwardly as he entered.

“Pardon me–we just received contact from the ‘Guild’ HQ.”

“What did they say?”

Halter did not answer as he approached Marie, and handed a document.

Marie received this report, and quickly browsed through it.

What was written on it–

"–!!"

- Crumples*

Marie showed a demonic expression as she crushed the papers.

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"What's going on?"

Marie roared as she slammed her hands onto the table.

But despite her being in such a furor, the target of this outrage continued to pour the red tea nonchalantly.

The man called himself Limonz.

His black hair was combed neatly, and he was dressed in a black striped suit, an amicable looking bespectacled man. He was the point of contact sent from the 'Guild' headquarters, and he was the one who instructed Marie to head from the core pillar to this central hotel.

…When we can't afford to lose every single second too! Marie was getting more impatient.

"So I said, it is an order to retreat."

Limonz said with an honest look.

"As you can see from your own report, the client, the 'military', orchestrated this ploy to escape responsibility–and also, there is no hope in finishing the repairs in this current situation."

"However!"

"Thus, it is not a priority to remain at this place. This is what HQ has decided."

“…Are you saying that we abandon this city?”

LImonz smiled as he shrugged his shoulders and said to Marie, whose shoulders were quivering,

“Please do relax, Professor Breguet. HQ has already controlled the situation.”

“…That means they’re going to handle it through political means?”

“Yes, of course. This failure will not cause any ruination to your career”

“–What are you saying?”

There was disgust in Marie’s words,

“Who’s talking about my career! This city’s in a critical situation of not knowing if it’s going to be purged.”

“It will be purged.”

Limonz calmly stated.

He slowly got up, turning his back on a speechless Marie, approached the window as he oversaw the streets below through the speckless window, continuing,

“It is an established fact that Kyoto will be abandoned.”

“…What are you trying to say?”

Marie was ensnared in fear as she asked, but Limonz did not answer. He looked down upon the street, pointed his index finger, and nudged his glasses.

“Right now, the ‘military’ will not get involved, Professor Breguet. Since we have known of it, the fact will remain that they tried to slaughter citizens if we stop the repairs now.”

“It’s the same as actually doing the killing, right?”

“Any explanation would do as long as matters are settled. The ‘Guild’ HQ has already recognized this.”

Marie inadvertently gasped.

“–What do you mean?”

“If we reveal such a truth, the ‘military’ would lose trust, and the people will be shaken. This isn’t an ideal development for us to, and we have to be the temporary scapegoats for the time being to prevent the situation from developing to such a point–this is what HQ has decided.”

“What nonsense are you saying!?”

Marie lashed out, but Limonz did not respond, like he never heard her.

He never even looked back.

“Will you calm down and think about it, Professor Breguet? After we reveal the intentions of the ‘military’, what will be left thereafter? We do have a world population of 4.5 billion, more than 20 thousand core pillars and city circles, and including the core clock towers, that makes it more than 6 million regions, you know? If the ‘military’ is to be dissolved, who will take over the maintenance work they’re supposed to do?”

“That’s just an irrational argument! It’s because we can’t allow such a thing to happen that we have to stop their ploy.”

“You’re asking the ‘military’ to come clean? That’s impossible.”

Limonz looked over his shoulder as he said.

“This incidence is called by the incompetence of the ‘military’, and they chose to give up to hide this situation they’re unable to deal with. Can’t they just request the ‘Guild’? But we don’t have the ability to handle such a situation at all. We definitely don’t have the manpower, let alone the abilities.”

“…What are you trying to say?”

“It is a mutual codependence.”

Limonz showed a sneered.

“Both the ‘military’ and the ‘Guild’ has to exist. We do have to apologize for taking in the outstanding personnel, so it is alright for us to be the scapegoats once in a while, no?”

“…You’re willing to slaughter 20 million people just for that?”

“This truly is a sacrifice worth mourning over.”

Limonz nodded, but his expression showed no signs of mourning.

“–I understand what you mean now!”

Marie threw the documents–the ones with the orders to retreat onto the table, and turned to leave.

“Oh? Professor Breguet, where do you intend to go to?”

“Back to the scene to work. We’re definitely not going to give up no matter what HQ says.”

“This certainly is troubling. You are quite the reckless person.”

“I knew that–let’s go.”

Marie commanded Halter, who was standing in a corner of the room like a statue, and went for the door. The instant she placed her hand on the door and wanted to walk out however, Limonz spoke up.

He spoke in an exceptionally clear voice,

“–In that case, I shall strip you of your authority.”

And Marie suddenly stopped in her tracks.

She looked back.

Limonz was standing at the front of where Marie was glaring at, holding a set of documents bundled in blue string. He undid the string and unveiled the documents, his rimless glasses reflecting white light against the sunlight behind.

“Marie Bell Breguet was assigned as the 1st division, 2nd team leader of the ‘Meister Guild’ during the 992nd Annual General Meeting on the day October 4th, Ring Year 1013. However, there is clear evidence that she defied direct orders from HQ, and the immediate decision is that she shall be stripped of her rank and her current authority.”

Limonz finished reading it, and handed the document over.

“It has already been formalized. Do you wish to confirm it?”

Marie walked towards Limonz wordlessly, and snatched the documents from his hands, glaring at the words with bloodshot eyes. Halter then stood forward from beside her, saying,

“Please pardon me, Mr Limonz. I do apologize for interrupting, but please allow me to ask–why do you so happen to have such documents prepared?”

“Just in case. The fact remains that it did come in handy for such an occasion, no?”

Limonz showed a disgustingly, nauseating smile as he continued,

“I tried my best not to, but I can’t ignore the fact that you tried to use a 100 of our precious technicians based on your own opinion.”

Marie solemnly folded the document, placed it in her pocket, and lifted her head gradually, staring at Limonz with a gloomy look.

Limonz faced this stare, and spread his arms wide, chuckling,

“Oh, don’t think of getting rid of me here and pretend that nothing has happened.”

“…”

“I handed the same documents to the ‘military’ in this city. As of now, you have been stripped of your rank and your authority. You are no longer enjoying the privilege of a Meister, just a mere ordinary person. You are not allowed to enter the core tower without the ‘military’ permit.”

The sound of teeth being gritted could be heard.

Marie glared at Limonz, looking as if she could have strangled him several times in her own ecstasy if she was allowed to do so–suddenly, this expression faltered due to surprise.

She turned her head aside, moving her stare upwards, and widened her eyes.

I remember now. Marie calmly said to this sinister smiling man,

“…You do call yourself Limonz, right?”

“Yes. What about it?”

“I recall now. We met before during the meeting of the 5 Enterprises. You’re from the Vachron family, right?”

The smile disappeared from Limonz’s face, and was instantly replaced by a sneer.

“–I do feel honored to be remembered by you, Miss Breguet. We were in the same academic year too; I wonder if you remember.”

“No, not at all.”

“…I guess that is to be expected. It is a pity, for I do not have such a talent after all. This is why I am part of the administrative department in HQ.”

Vachron.

It was one of the 5 Enterprises alongside the Breguet company Marie belonged to–one of the sponsors of the ‘Meister Guild’.

No matter how the ‘Guild’ proclaimed to be a non-profit organization, they could not ignore the wills of the sponsors, for it was an organization driven by manpower, materials and money.

In fact, the ‘Guild’ operations was related to the wills of the 5 Enterprises–the Breguets, Vachrons and so on.

Marie already knew that, and even made use of that.

But–

“Is this the plan of the Vachrons?”

Marie glared at Limonz as she hissed.

Though it was said that her career would not be affected, that was impossible.

If they were to carry out the ‘purge’, the ‘military’ would push responsibility upon the ‘Guild’, that the ‘Guild’ came to sling mud upon them. In fact, they would push the responsibility onto Marie–and even the Breguet family.

The other 4 major families would not fail to capitalize on this chance to weaken the Breguets.

–Anyway, this was a co-conspiracy between the ‘military’ and the

‘Guild’.

A plot by the Vachrons to weaken the Breguets’ influence.

But Limonz merely shrugged at Marie’s interrogation, showing a slimy, filthy smile,

“–What are you saying? I do not understand at all?”

This expression surpassed all attempts at quibbling, quietly affirming Marie’s hypothesis.

“Y-you, guys…!”

Her face was gloomy due to fury, rage burning within her.

Marie could not understand.

If they did that, the ‘Guild’ would end up suffering huge losses.

The trust and pride their forefathers had built since a thousand years ago shall be irrevocably sullied–for such a stupid reason.

She recalled what Halter had said before,

“Can those incompetent ones do anything?”

At this point, she could understand the comforting smiles and fears of the incompetent–could she understand? No, how could she understand? How could she do it?

A precious item. An important inheritance they should protect. Will, pride, ideals, their lives, and the purity of a soul!

Yet they had forsaken such things so easily–because of despicable reasons envy, jealousy, even the small things that could not be described by such words, like short-sightedness, small-time mentality, ugliness, filthiness.

Marie could not understand.

“–Marie!”

Marie suddenly recovered due to this growl.

Halter stiffly said.

Marie wanted to roar back instinctively, but remained silent.

She clenched her trembling fists, adjusted her breathing, and nodded,

"…Yeah, let's go."

Both Marie and Halter left the room in silence.

Limonz watched them leave with a thin smile until the very end, and it really required an unimaginable amount of self-restraint to stop the impulse to destroy him.

Both of them walked down the wide corridor silently, and finally arrived in front of the elevator.

Both of them waited silently for the elevator to arrive after pressing the button. It was merely 2 minutes long, but to Marie, it felt as long as 1, 2 hours.

The elevator arrived soon after. Both of them entered it, and the 1st level button was pressed.

That was the limit.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH–!!"

Marie roared out, slamming the wall of the elevator with all her might.

The elevator shook so greatly it came to an abrupt stop.

"Calm down, Marie."

"SHUT UP!"

Marie flailed her arms about as she made a ruckus, her fists slamming at Halter's hands while the latter tried to stop her. However, Halter remained unmoved, and this attitude caused her much more vexation, her fury exploding.

She yelled, growled, and slammed her fists, her light blond hair falling, her breathing erratic as she continued to kick and stamp at Halter's stump-like legs.

Halter did not resist as he merely endured the girl's rage silently.

Of course, this level of pain was nothing to him, who had been converted into a cyborg.

Marie grabbed Halter's suit, buried her head into his sturdy abdomen, and a tremendous impact echoed reverberated through his body.

"–You understand!?"

Marie buried her head in as she yelled.

The hoarse voice was trembling.

“Hey, you understand? Why did they frame me!? For such a stupid reason too! This city! The 20 million people here! They’re going to be implicated and become sacrifices here!?”

“That’s not it.”

Halter concluded with a heavy tone,

“You’re mistaken, Marie. Don’t get too conceited. The ‘military’ will continue to carry out ‘purges’ no matter whether you’re here or not. Those bastards at the ‘Guild’ simply used this to frame you.”

“What makes you think that way!”

Marie flared up again as she lashed out.

She buried her head in him, slamming her little fists at his chest.

“If I wasn’t around, maybe the ‘Guild’ could have exerted pressure on the ‘military’! Maybe they would have send reinforcements! Maybe the purge would have been avoided!”

“Even so, it’s not your fault.”

“Shut up!!!”

Marie yelled again as she hammered Halter.

Halter remained unmoved as he silently took the growls and hits. It was easy for him to restrain an unarmed girl, and he had the ability to hug and comfort the little girl, but he chose not to.

–For he knew Marie Bell Breguet did not need any of those.

Soon after, Marie’s fury ceased as she buried herself in Halter’s abdomen, not moving at all. Soon after, her shoulders trembled slightly.

“…huhu…huhuhuhu…hahahahaha!!”

Marie’s expression suddenly changed as she started laughing, her eyes slightly swollen red. Halter tried his best to ignore the marks on his suit as he sighed, saying,

“…Have you calmed down?”

“What do you mean by that? What are you saying, Halter? I’m always calm. My head’s probably as clear as ever.”

“I really can’t tell.”

“Ahh, ahh! Sorry Halter! Are you angry that I hit you a little? I’m really sorry about that, but I’m now feeling all refreshed now!”

“That’s good.”

Halter grumbled as he tidied his unkempt clothes weakly.

He again pressed the button on the panel, restarting the elevator that had come to an emergency stop.

Marie glanced up at Halter, and murmured before laughing,

“It’s fine. Bring it on, you useless politicians…! Try pulling each other down as much as you want. It’s pitiful that such tragic creatures can only do this until they end up hurting each other!”

“…It’s hopeless.”

Marie ignored a sighing Halter, and frowned,

“–Think about it, Marie. There’s definitely some way to break this deadlock.”

Marie nudged her chin, bit her lips as she pondered.

The ‘military’ would not stop, and the ‘Guild’ could not be relied on, so they could not hope to settle this through political means. They could not start to evacuate the people at this point. The only option left for them was to finish the repairs before the city was to be purged.

In this case, what would the problem be?

The problem was that they had no time. Okay, this was something they could not solve.

Now then, think. Is there a way to finish the repairs in the next 8 hours?

The answer’s negative. There’s no way to do it no matter how I think about it realistically. How about I change the method? Can we finish the repairs within 8 hours if we can detect the anomaly? Of course we can.

But to execute it–the way to affirm this anomaly–

“Think about it carefully, Marie. There has to be! There has to be a way!”

…Of course, Marie could not think of it no matter how she tried.

Even if she gathered all the outstanding talents and equipment in the world, she was no wizard.

She had to admit that it was impossible–however, but, irregardless,

“How can I allow this ‘impossible’ to happen because of those incompetents’ interferences?

The elevator reached the first level, and the doors slowly slid aside.

Let’s think about it in the car next. Marie thought as she lifted her head. At that moment,

A very familiar face suddenly appeared in front of her.

“–!”

“Hey RyuZU, is it alright to live in such a place?”

“Master Naoto. Please forgive my frankness for saying that your flea-like thriftiness may be a virtue, but as my Master, would you please have some form of honor and dignity befitting that?”

It was a small boy wearing a set of headphones and a beautiful silver-haired girl.

Marie had never met the boy before; her issue was with the girl.

She was very familiar with the girl’s face, having seen it several times since her youth.

Or to be precise, her slumbering face lying in the treasury of her house.

After becoming a Meister, Marie even brought that girl along to her workplaces, thinking of taking up the challenge to repair the girl if

she had the time, and starting her up–

“Ah, ah, ah…”

“Hm?”

“What is the matter, Master Naoto?”

The girl turned her surprised face to them in shock.

This unworldly beauty—the automata was clearly operating.

–YD-01, Initial-Y series, model 1, RyuZU.

Marie was flabbergasted as she tilted her head in surprise, harboring a small hope to break the current deadlock.

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The first level lobby of the Central Hotel slightly resembled a shopping mall.

There were large shops near the entrance, posh restaurants on the right side, and shops selling branded goods and boutiques on the left.

They went to one of the cafe lounges within viewing distance of the hotel’s courtyard, and Marie spoke up,

“Can you lend me a hand, RyuZU?”

Her hands were on the table as she suddenly leaned towards RyuZU on the other side. The latter’s golden eyes were enigmatic as she showed an aloof look.

Naoto, seated beside her, raised her hand, saying,

“Erm—excuse me? Who are you anyway?”

“You don’t recognize me?”

Marie sounded skeptical, and Naoto shrugged.

“Not at all. I don’t watch TV. Are you an artiste or something?”

Halter, seated beside Marie, tapped his bald head, and chuckled,

“Artiste? That’s good to hear.”

“Halter, now’s not the time for jokes, right?”

“No no, there’s nothing wrong with that in fact, right? Aren’t you the cover model for a few issues of ‘Automata Fan’ and ‘Technical Weekly’?”

“That’s because Sister abandoned the planning, and I was forced to salvage the situation.”

“’Automata Fan’? I should have seen it before.”

Naoto murmured as he pondered.

That magazine was his favorite read, and he bought every issue of it starting from a tender age. He however could not remember seeing this blond girl’s face in front of him.

Naoto then shrugged.

“I can’t possibly remember all the cover models anyway—who are you anyway”

“That’s what I want to ask you.”

Marie glared at Naoto unhappily, saying,

“I’m Marie Bell Breguet, a Meister of the “Meister Guild’. This YD-01 RyuZU is a private belonging of our family.”

“Private belonging…?”

Naoto tilted his head perplexed, “Ah!” and then, he shouted and stood up.

“It’s you guys!? You idiots dropped the container on someone’s house from high above!”

“Co-Container!?”

Naoto’s expression changed completely as he brought himself to a visibly daunted, stammering Marie.

“Thanks to you, I lose the house and all the tools my dead parents left me, I’m penniless, without a home at the age of 16, met RyuZU and made a contract with her. How are you going to repay me!? Thank you very much too!”

The short boy shouted all these and made a bow. Marie stared at him in disgust, and said to Halter,

“Halter, what is this idiot saying now? Was he actually thanking us?”

“Who knows? Aren’t they both acting weird…?”

“An-y-way! In place of my lost house, fortune and all sorts of condolence payments, RyuZU’s mine! It’s decided! I just decided it, so you can just go back now, you slab of protein!”

“What kind of sleep talk is that, you moron?”

Marie lashed back, and inadvertently panted.

She pressed her temple, resisted the throbbing pain, adjusted her breathing, and tried to coax Naoto with a calm voice.

“…Listen, I empathize with your plight. The airport’s mistake caused the container to fall, and I do apologize in place of them for that. However, RyuZU’s an irreplaceable asset of my family, and I ask you to return it to me. With my name, I can give you a suitable amount of compensation–”

“No, I refuse. RyuZU’s mine.”

Naoto childishly rebuffed Marie.

All sorts of emotions then disappeared from Marie’s face as she turned to Halter,

“Kill him and bury him. Everything will be settled.”

But Halter lowered his voice as he shook his hand,

“…Stop it, Milady.”

“What? It’s an emergency. I don’t have time to deal with this moron–”

“I TOLD YOU TO STOP, MARIE!”

Marie was shocked upon hearing Halter’s sudden outburst, and remained silent.

The next moment, she realized.

“Wha…!?”

Unwittingly,

Two ‘black scythes’ were pointed at Marie’s neck from under the table.

RyuZU readied them from under her skirt seemingly without any action, and her still enigmatic eyes reflected Marie’s stiff expression.

–Marie had once dissected her body before, and she knew they were the only weapons RyuZU carried—the specifications were so powerful it could easily slice through military alloy armors, let alone any person.

Cold sweat was trickling down Marie.

The angelic girl seemed to have come across a cannibalistic tiger in the forest, and she knew that though these ethereal-like blades looked like it was attached gently, they were as sharp as a beast’s fangs, clamping her neck.

She had a doubt–why am I still alive?

“…ah, ah.”

She was panting, her body unable to move. Despite this, she tried to move her eyeballs to Halter, and found him wielding a gun with a tense look.

The gun however was not pointed at the automata.

The gun–was pointed at the dumbstruck-looking boy.

RyuZU wanted to kill Marie, and Halter wanted to kill Naoto. Both killing intents crossed paths, and a bead of sweat trickled down Halter as he amicably said,

“Alright, have you calmed down now, Milady?”

“–Who exactly are you pointing that gun at?”

Despite the golden eyes glaring upon him, Halter maintained his smile,

“My companion merely had a slip of the tongue, and I do apologize for that. This is a moment of hysteria for her due to some deplorable situation she went through, so she is a little angsty. She doesn’t mean it, so please let her go.”

“If you do not have enough comprehensive ability, I shall repeat this again. Humans are already far inferior to fleas, but since an odds and end like you inferior to them have the guts to point such a toy to Master Naoto, you would not mind if I dice you two to bits together, would you?”

RyuZU hissed, her voice so cold even the devil would have sobbed in fear.

Her emotionless face carried a clear killing intent,

“Understood. I’ll lower my gun here. I wasn’t serious anyway. See? The safety’s still on here.”

Halter slowly turned the gun around to reveal the safety, and lowered his gun.

“So please, don’t chop off this Milady’s head here.”

It seemed RyuZU accepted these words, for she silently folded the black scythes back beneath the skirt that instant. She remained still at that instant.

“–Ha…haa…”

Having been realized from the cold mechanical killing intent, Marie continued to touch her neck and stumbled back onto her seat. It seemed she had difficulty believing that she was still alive, her eyelids were quivering, her emerald eyes unable to focus.

“Wh-What…?”

“You alright, Milady?”

Halter grabbed Marie’s shoulder and said this to comfort her,

“I’m also feeling anxious here, but these two have nothing to do with our own matters, so watch what you say next time, or else you’re going to say goodbye to your own head.”

Because of these words, Marie widened her eyes and lashed out,

“Halter! I almost got killed back then!?”

“Yeah. Good that you understood it so quickly.”

“Why’s it that non-military automatas can kill!?”

“This one doesn’t have ethical restrictions.”

Halter nonchalantly said some ridiculous-sounding words, and looked over at the formal looking automata,

“This Missy here never looked away from you from the moment you showed your killing intent at this young boss. That’s why I have been wary of her all this while, however–even I couldn’t react to those actions just now…you understand what I mean?”

“…That’s…”

In other words, even Halter, who was enhanced with the latest cybernetics, could not read this automata’s action to fight despite his reflexes.

He had been wary all the while, but he was already worn out taking the hostage ‘thereafter’.

“–To be honest, I wouldn’t be able to do that if she really wanted to kill you.”

In other words, that just now was a warning. If she really wanted to kill, this threat would not be one; Marie and Halter would be diced to bits without knowing.

And also, there was no way they could defend against that.

Halter waited for Marie to understand this, and continued,

“…You understand? Anyway, calm down first. Forget about this Missy being a private asset of the the Breguets for the time being, and endure this no matter what. This is the rule now.”

RyuZU showed a sincere smile, and said,

“Please allow me to take back the description of you being just odds and ends. Your understanding seems decent for a human.”

“Thanks for understanding this.”

Halter raised his hands, and said,

“I do apologize for our acrimony, but beyond that, I will like you to hear us out. This important problem doesn’t just involve me, but also the lives of 20 million people in this city.”

And then, Halter started to explain the events that transpired.

The gravity anomaly of Kyoto, the overly urgent deployment, the conspiracy and motives behind this, the ‘military’ intentions to abandon everything and cover up the truth, the internal factions of the ‘Guild’ using this opportunity to seize power, and the despairingly little time they had–

Naoto heard all of Halter’s explanation, and cupped his head in shock.

He finally managed to recover, and gasped,

“Wa-wa-wa-wai-wait! The ‘military’s going to abandon this city? Leave the people behind and watch them die–are you serious?”

“We can’t joke about such a thing.”

Marie gave up on trying to be courteous as she continued in a wearisome manner.

“How…there’s nothing you can do?”

“To be honest, we can’t do anything.”

Marie lowered her eyes as she clenched her fists, crestfallen.

“Anyway, we don’t have time. I’m stripped of my authority, and I can’t get back to the core tower. We need to break through the ‘military’s interference, and even if we do get there, there’s no hope of repairing it.”

“How’s…”

“The fatal reason is that we can’t specifically pinpoint the cause, and my observation team estimates that it’ll take us two weeks to

complete. Of course, it goes without saying that we won't be able to make it, but…"

At this point, Marie turned to RyuZU, who remained unflinching despite hearing the despairing words, and asked softly,

"You can more or less handle this if it is you, right?"

RyuZU remained silent.

"Hey, wait. Hearing you say that, it means you're an organization comprised of Meisters right? If you guys need two weeks to do this with all your manpower, how's RyuZU going to do that?"

Marie did not answer these words as she turned to RyuZU's golden eyes, saying,

"I heard about your legend. The Initial-Y series. You are one of the best automatas left behind by the legendary clock technician 'Y', who created this 'Clockwork Planet'. Though there are no signs of damage on you, this mysterious girl automata that remains unmoved…"

RyuZU stared back at Marie in silence. Because of this look, the latter recalled the feeling of nearly being killed, and inadvertently froze up as she continued in a murmuring manner,

"300 years ago, your functions suddenly ceased. Thousands of technicians, including me, tried to repair you, only to come up short against this jewel of 'Y'–the first model of the initial-Y series. It is said that the one who can gather the entire series can rule the world and receive 'Y's inheritance…that is all just an urban rumor however. The Breguet's that kept you have some fragments of information regarding you."

RyuZU did not respond, and Marie licked her dry lips before continuing,

"Those in the Initial-Y series are all tasked with unique functions. It is said the first unit, you, have a function called 'Acceleration'–an automata that specializes in moving at high speeds."

Naoto, who had been listen by the side, widened his eyes.

–I see. That explains all the doubts I have.

She carried Naoto away from danger the moment she was activated, moved at high speeds to instantly strip the flirting men, and moved so quickly that Halter could not react.

That was probably the inherent function Marie talked about.

The current military units could not contain such superb functions, but if the creator was that 'Y'–it could explained.

Marie said,

"This is how I explain your existences, the Initial-Y series. Aren't you the maintenance machines for the 'Clockwork Planet' left behind by 'Y'?"

Right? Marie asked in a pleading manner.

The 'Clockwork Planet', a complete replica of the planet itself, had an intrinsic structure.

Amongst ordinary people—no, even amongst those who had researched on this aspect over the past thousand years, none of them could come close to 'Y' himself. Nobody could understand the technology he left behind. They finally managed to replicate certain parts after copying, but even it, it was not perfect.

–For the sake of those after his death,

To prevent this world from being destroyed again.

He created the heirs that would neither age nor die–

"Right now, you all are the children of 'Y', and inherit the skills that were lost. The inheritance is based on such rumors. When this city is about to collapse, your activation–"

Was the best proof. Marie looked at RyuZU expectantly.

Ohh…! Halter widened his eyes, looking impressed.

Naoto too could not hide his own excitement as he stared at RyuZU.

If what Marie said was correct, this silver-haired girl was definitely the angel saving this city from collapse.

However,

In the face of such expectant and admiring looks, this legendary automata merely giggled like a response to a failed gag, showing a doubtful expression as she said,

“–I do not understand what you are saying at all. Please pardon me, but your mind—is extremely dangerous.”

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There was some awkward silence.

Marie’s smiling face was frozen in place, Halter dug his ear, giving an inexplicable look, and Naoto looked back and forth between RyuZU and Marie, looking confused.

“……Ah–please excuse me, Missy.”

Amongst them, Halter was the first to react as he tilted his head slightly, calmly asking,

“I do wish to confirm this; in other words, what Milady said was all wrong?”

“Yes.”

RyuZU nodded at Halter.

“I really found it difficult to refute your lofty talk with such a confident face–but your guess is completely wrong, so far away it is silly.”

- Bam*. Marie’s head fell onto the table with a thud, probably lying prone on the table out of extreme shame as her body shuddered.

RyuZU calmly continued,

“What you said is true, that I am created by ‘Y’, that I have inherent functions unique only to me, that I am the strongest automata in the world. This is irrefutable.”

Marie lifted her head suddenly, speaking in a prayerful manner,

“Th-then…!”

“However, my main purpose is not to maintain the construct of this world, I do not have the related knowledge or expertise, and I am not granted the command to ‘protect a city’.”

As Marie froze in place again, Halter again continued,

“So, what are you?”

“– ‘Your slave’.”

RyuZU said those words as she lowered her gaze upon the hand on her chest. The unspoken meaning behind that gesture was that this was the most important thing.

“This is the paramount mission embedded within me–to serve my master, Master Naoto with my all. This is the only reason of my existence.”

Halter looked unable to say anything as he remained silent.

RyuZU then turned to Marie, who looked asphyxiated, and quipped,

“Also, I have to emphasize. Please do not compare my inherent function with a low-class function like ‘acceleration’. Even if that is the case, I do not have the function to locate a malfunction, and with regards to the issue you are facing—I have no interest at all, to put it bluntly.”

RyuZU said these words with a nice smile on her face, and a long silence continued.

Marie had her hands on her face as she looked up, while Halter looked completely lethargic. In the face of this scene, which one would title ‘despair’, Naoto could not find anything to say, and could only remain silent alongside them—however,

“…There is someone however…”

RyuZU murmured, and Halter slowly lifted his face.

“A person might be able to answer to your expectations.”

‘! Who!?”

Marie practically jumped up as she bit on RyuZU’s lead.

With both of them watching, RyuZU slowly pointed at the stunned looking boy to her left, calmly stating,

“Master Naoto.”

“–Huh?”

Having become the topic so suddenly, Naoto frantically pointed to himself.

RyuZU nodded at him, and said to Marie.

“As you have heard, I do believe Master Naoto, who managed to repair me, might be able to save this city.”

“Wait a moment–he repaired you!?”

Marie exclaimed in shock.

“What nonsense is that!? You weren’t damaged in any way!”

She was supposed to be a fine, undamaged mysterious automata that could not be activated.

“That only proves that you are more incompetent than Master Naoto.”

“Ah, I got grouped into the useless category again, though it’s fine.”

Marie ignored Naoto, who softly complained this, and growled,

“Y-You’re saying that I’m incompetent…!? You’re saying that the Breguets, who have bred countless hundreds of Meisters, are unable to compete with this guy?”

RyuZU curled her lips in a mocking manner.

Her smile clearly showed fury, unlike the one used when facing Naoto, and she continued,

“–Yes. ‘This guy’ you talk of repaired the anomaly your massive family could not detect despite racking your flea-like brains for the past 200＋ years –within 3 mere hours.”

Upon hearing such light talk, Marie’s thoughts ceased at that instance.

She stared at Naoto blankly, and asked,

“…Th-this unimpressive guy?”

RyuZU silently lifted her skirt, and Marie frantically shook her head, screaming,

“I-I got it I got it I take it back! …no, but it’s true that RyuZU is activated now…why is such a technician hidden within the streets…?”

Marie mumbled to herself as she slumped onto the chair.

On the other hand, Naoto, who was suddenly named, was covered in cold sweat as he said to RyuZU,

“No, erm, Miss RyuZU? I’m really really grateful that you’re praising me, but if even a hundred Meisters can’t do this, how can I possibly–”

“You can.”

RyuZU concluded.

“The Master Naoto who repaired me is undoubtedly the greatest technician in current humanity.”

“No, I’m really honored to be said this by you, RyuZU…but.”

–It won’t work.

Impossible. Either way, I’m an amateur who’s not even an apprentice, you know?

Words of denial immediately appeared in Naoto’s mind, but he found it difficult to say this given RyuZU’s serious expression.

He was frustrated, perplexed, but he had to answer something. The moment he was about to speak up however,

“–!!”

The city started to quake intensely due to a shock of an

unprecedented scale.

Chapter 4 – Conquistador (19:30)

The air was trembling violently.

Naoto took a tremendous impact, and fell heavily from the chair onto the floor. He laid still on it, unable to get up immediately.

–Even in modern society, where the entire planet was replicated using parts, there would be earthquakes.

It was simply the release of stress from the city's construct system, at most a slight tremor humans could barely detect, an occasional occurrence that happened spontaneously.

However, this was not that simple.

The impact just now seemed to cause a tremendous jolt, to a point one might feel the entire city would be reduced to rubble.

The cupboard behind the cafe restaurant counter fell.

The massive chandelier in the hotel lobby fell.

A series of accidents happened on the main street in front of the station.

Explosions and noises could be heard one after another, entering Naoto's ears through the headphones.

During this time, the tremors showed no signs of ceasing.

And then, Naoto saw it,

The red teacups flung off the tables did not fall onto the floor, but floated in the air. The red tea within too floated in the air, taking the form of brown goblets.

…What's going on?

In what seemed to be a spontaneous response to Naoto's doubts, Marie exclaimed.

"A gravity anomaly…!"

She immediately crouched onto the floor and hid under the table. Beside her, Halter could only poke his head in (for his body was too big), and he anxiously asked,

“Has the collapse began?”

“Halter, how much time do we have left?”

“7 hours and 12 minutes–it should have been enough.”

Marie widened her eyes in shock.

“Has the ‘military’ begun the purge earlier…?”

“No, calm down. If what the higher-ups of the ‘Guild’ said is true, they won’t allow our technicians to be involved in the collapse.”

“But even so, a telltale sign of this scale is beyond expectations. If the chaos spreads, those guys might try something more forceful…!”

After a while, the tremors stopped.

However, there was a tense atmosphere surrounding them, as if lightning was about to befall upon them.

Naoto shooed the distant screams and growls into a corner of his consciousness, and stood up.

At this moment, Marie spoke up,

“You–”

“Huh?”

“What’s your name?”

Her emerald eyes contained a serious mood as she stared at him.”

Naoto could not ignore it, and answered,

“…I’m Naoto. Naoto Miura.”

Upon hearing that, Marie sighed,

She dejectedly lowered her head, and then lifted it adamantly,

“Good, Naoto. I just introduced myself, but I’ll do it again. My

name's Marie, and though I won't admit that you're a technician more amazing than me–"

She stopped talking, for RyuZU was behind her, giving a serious look.

She forced a smile, and continued,

"But I'll agree to that to save my own life, 'kay!? Listen up!? Enough with the formalities and courtesy! I just want a definite answer from you, even if it's small. Do you have something that can possibly deal with this situation!?"

"Erm.."

"We can."

RyuZU immediately answered in place of the hesitant Naoto.

And then, she calmly said to Marie, who turned around,

"From what you said, your problem is not that 'you do not have time', but that 'you cannot identify the cause of the error'."

Marie hesitated,

"…That's right. Even if you say so however, what's the difference between them?"

"The difference is clear to see. To put it the other way, if you can locate the cause, it should be fine."

Marie hesitated slightly, and nodded,

"Right. If he can locate the cause, he can leave the rest to us…"

"In that case, there shall be no further issues–Master Naoto."

"Wh-What?"

"You should have understood very well the cause of the anomaly in this city–the source of this sound."

Upon hearing those words, Marie inadvertently titled her head.

"Voice?"

If that's all they need, I guess it's alright…Naoto nodded,

"But I'm not exactly very sure on where it is…we got to go to the 24th level to find that out."

"Wa-wait!"

Marie shrieked, and grabbed Naoto tightly.

"How did you know the anomaly happened on the 24th level?"

"Eh?"

Marie looked ready to gnaw as she furiously interrogated a dumbstruck Naoto,

"Neither Halter nor I mentioned anything about the problem happening on the 24th level. How did you know when you haven't entered the core tower?"

"Why, you ask…"

Naoto looked a little lost as he answered,

"Because the distorted sound is coming from there, right?"'

"–What…?"

"I already felt that it was very noisy, and it got unbearably noisy since two days ago. I thought the 'military' neglected to maintain it or something…"

"2 days ago–"

Marie widened her mouth in shock.

She recalled the gravitational anomaly that happened in the wee hours. That anomaly–*but the calculations were only compiled by the 10 people in the observation team—no, wait,* ***a distorted sound****?*

Marie was stunned, and Halter beside her cautiously asked,

"May I ask, Naoto–if what you're saying is that you managed to

pinpoint an anomaly 70km deep from the surface through the sound, through your own hearing, unassisted by any apparatus?

“Yeah, why?”

Naoto nodded casually, but Marie and Halter froze.

They were stunned.

They could understand the meaning behind these words, but on the other hand, they could not believe him at all.

They could not believe that this little boy right in front of them was human.

Marie yelled in a trembling voice,

“H-Hey you! Do you know what kind of an amazing thing did you just say casually?”

“No, erm, don’t you already know?”

Naoto said it as a matter-of-fact, but Marie lashed out forlornly,

“…Yeah, we did, but that’s because we had no choice but to catch a ‘military’ technician and interrogate him after only managing to check the first 2 levels in a single day!”

Naoto widened his mouth in shock, and asked skeptically,

“Why does it have to be that troublesome? Ah, is it because you guys are being careful?”

“It’s because we can’t detect it if we don’t do it…”

After saying those words, Halter made a deep sigh, seemingly wanting to squeeze out all the air from his artificial lungs.

“Huh? My ears are better than ordinary people’s, but you guys have the listening devices, right?”

“…I say, who’ll go through so much work if listening devices can solve this–?”

“Hold on.”

Marie interrupted a frowning Halter, and asked with a tense look,

"–Now that I realize it, aren't you wearing noise-cancelling headphones?"

"Hm, so what?"

You're kidding me, Marie shouted hoarsely.

"Yo-You're wearing such earphones–so why are you still able to converse with us?"

"Even if you ask me, it's cheap though?"

Naoto looked really lost as he scratched his cheek, and continued,

"It's not like I often listen to music, but it feels a lot more comfortable when things are quiet."

–Because I feel a lot more relaxed.

Once Naoto said this, Marie questioned him with a menacing stare,

"–Relaxed? Even the cheap stuff nowadays can block out sounds completely!"

"Even if you say so, I can hear you completely."

"That's why it's really weird! Your ears shouldn't be able to hear anything now, right? How in the world did you managed to 'hear' in such a situation?"

Marie looked ready to gnaw at any given moment, and Naoto merely blinked, scratched his head, and said,

"E-Erm, even if you say so."

"……No, that's fine. You don't look like you're lying."

Marie sighed, and solemnly asked,

"In other words, you can detect the cause of the anomaly through the sounds. If we bring you to the 24th level, you will be able to detect it. Once we do find it, we'll think of some way to deal with the rest–is that okay?"

As Marie continued to stare at him, Naoto scratched his head, looking bothered,

–I know people are pinning hopes on me.

This feeling was very foreign to Naoto himself–perhaps it was the first time even. He could not answer honestly at once, but hesitated a little, and answered unconfidently.

“E-Erm, I’ll tell you before you’re disappointed. I’m just an ordinary High School student, and playing with mechanics is just a hobby of mine. I’m just an amateur who’s not even an apprentice, let alone a technician, you know?”

“Thanks for saying so much nonsense.”

Marie glanced at Naoto as the latter muttered, and shrugged,

“But it’s fine. You’re not familiar with it, but I know how complicated RyuZU’s construct is. Since you’re able to repair her, and since you managed to located the malfunction through your ears, that’s enough. I believe in that.”

Naoto was silent.

After pondering for a little while, Naoto looked at this blond-haired girl for the first time–right in the eyes.

He asked,

“…I say, why are you going to such lengths?”

The wails of the passers-by reached his ears through the headphones.

Since he had known that this city was to be purged, there was no reason to stay here He too wanted to escape immediately.

“I can tell from your words that you have nowhere to go. Your future’s bleak. Why aren’t you running away?”

He thought that was an ordinary thought—however,

“I hate to think of something as being impossible.”

Marie told Naoto,

“There’s a limit to everything in nature, but telling me to give up when I decide to test myself to the limits is something I have to refuse. I’m making challenges no matter when it is, and that too

applies to my father, older sister, and all the Meisters."

Naoto could not comprehend such a thought.

"…Why?"

"Because this world's just like this–our planet died 1000 years ago. We met out limit, and reached the end. Because of that technician who never gave up however, we're able to continue living."

Marie smiled, and continued,

"Something irreplaceable will always stand in the far distance. That's why I don't want to give up. If I run away now–I'll lose my dignity forever."

"…"

And so, Marie murmured prayerfully,

"Please–lend me your power."

Naoto could not answer.

The boy who was born as an ordinary person, grew up in the bottom, and enjoyed his current lifestyle.

The prodigy girl who was born as a genius, refined her own talents, and honored her lofty ideals first and foremost.

They were like oil and water.

Their values differed so much it was depressing. There was no way they could understand in such a short time.

"…"

Naoto felt that since this city was about to collapse, he should escape immediately.

Luckily–if he could possibly say so, he had no place to call home. No matter where he went, this fact would not change.

Why should I believe in a creature called Marie I can't not understand and bring RyuZU to such a harsh scene? More importantly, what's the benefit for me?

"…Sorry…"

"Ah–Master Naoto. There is something I wish to report."

The moment Naoto was about to voice his refusal, RyuZU interrupted him.

"I do belong to you, so I do not know if I should answer…"

With these words as the prelude, RyuZU calmly spoke up.

And then, she looked in the direction of the core tower through the glass window.

"If she is not moved away…my **'little sister'** should be in the underground of Kyoto's core tower."

–**THUMP*!!*

Naoto sensed an intense throbbing of his heart.

For that instant, he forgot to breathe, as the words RyuZU said echoed in his mind over and over again.

–Little sister…sister, sister…eh? Sister…?"

"Little…sister…?"

–RyuZU's little sister.

Underneath the core tower?

In this Kyoto?

In this city's that's to be purged and buried along with this already dead planet?

His lungs were gasping for breath, the feeling of his blood flowing in reverse running within him.

"…That, in other words, that means…"

He tried his hardest to take a deep breath, trying to act calm.

Naoto then exclaimed, unable to hide his excitement while trying his hardest,

“A-an-an automata that’s built later than RyuZU?”

“Yes. The 4th unit of the Initial-Y series, ‘trishula’ AnchoR lies within there.”

“W-wa-wait, in other words, she’s a more advanced automata than you, RyuZU?”

Upon hearing Naoto’s excited words, RyuZU frowned.

“–There is no automata that is stronger than me in terms of cognitive abilities, but in terms of specifications, they can be superior to me under certain conditions. They are my capable little sisters inferior humans are unable to compare to.”

Naoto staggered to his feet.

His body temperature was surging, his blood pressure skyrocketing.

“Erm, well, before I actually see her, you mind telling me something?”

“Yes, may I know what you wish to ask?”

“Erm…she’s called AnchoR, right? ……how’s she like?”

“Let me think. Pretty and neat short black hair. Her irises are a little small, but she does have bright red irises. She assumes the form of what is equivalent to a 12-year-old human, is less than 140cm in height, and is inapt at expressing her emotions. As her codename ‘trishula’ indicates, she has the strongest fighting mobility and weapons amongst all the automatas–”

“–What’re we spacing out for!? Let’s go, guys!”

Naoto stood up straight and raised his fist to the sky.

He then said adamantly,

“If there’s a small possibility of saving 20 million people hiding in my hands, I’m definitely not going to let go! I guess this is my—destiny!”

Naoto said this with such vigor, his eyes glittering, like his soul was

burning.

Normally, they would be called ‘ulterior motives’ and ‘selfishness’.

Humans—especially women like Marie—would not know of this.

They would not know that men would risk their lives to fight just because of a spur of a moment.

These creatures called men were so foolish yet so noble–

“…I say, Milady. Is it really alright to leave this to that guy…”

“Don’t ask this, okay…?”

Marie shook her head and murmured in response to Halter’s mutter.

●●●

Having decided on heading to the core tower, Naoto and company quickly moved down the hotel’s aisle.

They were headed for the underground parking lot. Halter’s vehicle was parked there.

They passed through the lobby, now in a mess after the fancy chandelier that had fallen, and appeared at the staircase.

And Halter stopped there, turned back, and said,

“Then, how do we deal with them? You know, if we’re going to the core tower, there’ll definitely be interference.”

Halter glanced over at the other side of the wall.

And Marie, who understood the meaning of that, nodded,

“…We have to do something. If we’re discovered to be headed to the core tower, the staff at the workplace will end up taken as hostages.”

Marie sighed, and reluctantly shrugged.

At that moment, Naoto, standing right beside her, called out,

“What are you doing? Aren’t we going to the core tower?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“That’s not much time left, right? Let’s hurry up.”

“…That’s why I’m thinking of what we should do next. Understand?”

Marie clicked her tongue in annoyance.

In response to that, Naoto tilted his head perplexedly.

“**You’re talking about those guys over there watching us**? They’re the reason why we can’t move forward?”

Naoto displayed a surprising amount of observational skills, and Marie seemed more peeved than before as she frowned,

“…If you found that out, can you at least use your mind a little more? Do you think those guys watching us will let us go without saying anything once they see us?”

“No, but,”

Naoto stared at Halter’s massive body,

“Uncle here is a cyborg soldier, and RyuZU’s here. **Can’t we just end them before they make the report?”**

“Seriously, you…you’re becoming dangerous once you get motivated.”

And while Halter grimaced, Marie sighed softly,

“I want to do that too if I can, but it’s not that simple. This is politics. The technicians in the ‘military’ are all useless, but their organizational ability–”

“Then what do you want to do anyway? Political games?”

“–!!”

Marie swung a fist at Naoto–and stopped.

Her clear emerald eyes were staring at Naoto, her body trembling in rage.

Unable to hide her furor, she vented her frustrations as she lashed out,

“…You don’t understand anything at all!”

“I don’t understand. It’s because I don’t that I’m asking this, right?”

Naoto said

“What’s with politics, and what’s with organizational ability? Are those more important than going to the core tower and repairing it?”

He had no worries at all.

He was able to show such an unrestrained, unrestricted, radiant expression, for he was an ordinary citizen.

And this youth of freedom, who acted on his own whims for his own desires, said something philosophical,

“–Either way, everything else other than that doesn’t matter, right?”

“–!!”

Marie closed her eyes, and slammed her raised fist at the wall with all her might.

Then, she took a deep breath, and quietly spoke to the big man standing beside her,

“Halter.”

“Here.”

“Though–I’m really unhappy that I can’t out-talk this moron.”

“Don’t call me a moron.”

Marie ignored Naoto’s protests, and continued,

“Tell me, who do you think is correct, objectively?”

“Well…if it’s adults debating, you’re probably correct, Milady.”

Halter stroked his chin, and shrugged as he continued,

“–But if it’s between kids, isn’t it alright to agree with that brat’s view like a kid? This uncle’s job is to wipe the butts of a kid.”

…*Kid.* Marie murmured this word, and nodded, saying,

“Well–you’re right. I’m still a little girl after all.”

“Hm. You’re not a technician now, you’re nothing, just an arrogant snobbish Princess who’s inexperienced in the matters of the world.”

Halter chuckled happily.

He then reached out his sturdy palm, saying in a teasing manner,

“Is there any job you wish to hand over to me, Marie?”

“–Hm.”

Marie nodded, grimacing.

And RyuZU, standing beside them, coldly interjected,

“Are you finally done? Precious time is being wasted in masses like flowing water while you continued to hesitate. May I at least hope that you have the ability to reflect upon this?”

“I got it…but RyuZU, may I include you as fighting strength?”

In response to Marie’s question, RyuZU showed an elegant expression as she lifted the hems of her skirt slightly, and bowed.

“My job is to eliminate all obstacles standing in Master Naoto’s path.”

Marie nodded, and turned to Naoto,

“Naoto, since you said such big talk, you’re going to help me out, right?”

“Let me say this first. I’m weak at fighting.”

“I don’t have any expectations regarding that. More importantly–”

Marie placed her hands on her hips, and said to Naoto tauntingly,

“This ‘talent’ RyuZU said you have–show it to me.”

Naoto nodded, and sighed gently.

He slowly removed the cheap headphones that were giving off a green light.

And then,

–Amidst the sea of noise that was nauseating, Naoto stumbled.

“Uu…”

He frowned, and gritted his teeth.

He even had the feeling that everything entered his ears, and was stuck in his mind.

It was probably due to the change in gravity. The gears in the city were all giving off strange noises, and there were confused people shouting in response to the sudden turn of events. All sorts of noises could be heard, forming a sacrilege of an orchestra that entered Naoto’s ears.

“Master Naoto.”

Once she saw that Naoto was about to fall over, RyuZU immediately went over to support him.

“It is alright. If it is you, Master Naoto–you can definitely do it.”

Yeah. Naoto took a deep breath.

“I can’t ruin my name as a mechanical nerd here if I want to repay the trust of the best automata in this world.”

He closed his eyes.

–In the midst of the maddening storm of noises, a clear zephyr-like

melody could be heard.

It was the sound of RyuZU's gears moving, such a beautiful, elegant, perfect, fateful melody.

Thanks to the harmonic melody from RyuZU, Naoto was able to extract the important information from the massive pool of data that entered his mind.

And then–

"…Now then–let's go."

Naoto slowly started to count the number of those things.

●●●

Marie elegantly descended the spiral staircase leading to the parking lots.

And Naoto followed her from behind tentatively.

However, there appeared 2 men in their way, standing on the landing of the stairs.

The two hulking men stood side by side in front of Marie, giving off a pressure of wanting to crush her.

One of the men glared at her, saying,

"Are you ex-Meister Marie Bell Breguet?"

Marie grinned, and said,

"You won't believe me even if I tell you no, right?"

The men did not smile however,

"We're from the 'military'. There's something we would like to ask you, regarding the disappearance of the military technician Niijima."

"I see, so you used this as an excuse already. That's quite some

preparations you made.”

One of them stepped forward to grab Marie by the shoulder, however,

Marie lowered her body.

She stuck a leg out to trip the man grabbing her shoulder, and then slammed a high kick at the falling head. It was so strong a bone crack could be heard.

She looked down at the man that was taken down before he could say anything, and clicked her tongue.

“–Who allowed you to touch me? At least know your place.”

“Brat! You wanna fight–!?”

The other man too got agitated as he reached out for Marie.

Marie coldly knocked that hand away in a flowing motion.

And then, her arm drew an arch, the tightly clenched fist slammed directly into the chin.

The man tumbled over, unable to endure the pain, and defended his upper body as his posture was staggered.

At that moment, Marie pranced.

She did a sharp turn, the boot pounded deep into the man’s solar plexus with the help of centrifugal force.

This hulking man was taken down in that instant, and one could only hear the heavy sound of flesh tumbling onto the floor.

“_”

Marie landed on the floor together with her lofted coat.

And then, she drew a candy from her pocket without looking at the downed man, popped it into her mouth, and chewed on it.

Upon seeing this, Naoto instinctively knelt down.

“Sorry for saying all sorts of big talk to you just now!”

Please don't use those attacks on me. Naoto seemed to be begging this, and,

"Good. Glad that you understand."

Marie nodded, and turned around.

She turned to look at the corridor at the bottom of the stairs, linking to the parking lots.

Unexpectedly, there appeared a military automata.

It was a light-armored type that was bipedal. It had the silhouette of a human, but the two overly thick arms were ugly. The front end of the right arm was a muzzle, aimed right at the duo on the landing.

Marie widened her eyes in the face of this weapon that could easily mince 2 children.

"You got to be kidding me. That's scary."

However, this line was not intended to be said about the enemy.

Her face showed no signs of fear, despite being basked under the mechanical killing intent.

"Halter!"

A massive body responded to Marie's call, and leap down from above the corridor.

THUMP there was a dull impact.

Halter's fist landed firmly on the automata, using the falling momentum, causing the frame to be severely deformed and wrecked.

The automata staggered backwards, and Halter landed, protecting Marie and Naoto.

The automata immediately calculated the threat level of the enemy that had just attacked—through the analysis of the body functions and enemy distance, it assumed the completely mechanized soldier Halter to be the biggest threat, and changed targets from Marie to him.

But at that moment, Halter was standing right in front of the

automata.

He grabbed the massive right arm and crushed it using his own weight.

“–!”

The wires popped out, the gears and springs flying everywhere.

The automata stumbled a few steps backwards–but spun greatly, stamped on the floor and leapt at Halter.

The remaining left arm swung at him like a guillotine.

This was a hit that could send a human flying–but Halter easily blocked it with one hand.

“–, –!”

The automata started to tremble.

Halter grinned as he blocked the military automata that was struggling with all its might.

“That’s quite a simple battle algorithm. Hey, you want to tussle this completely mechanized me with the output of that light armor?– Aren’t you looking down on me now?”

The automata’s arm was crushed in a creak.

Halter grabbed that arm, his fingers twisting the armor. The shaft was shattered, and the frame was hammered.

“You—idiot!”

And then,

Halter stomped onto the floor, causing a radial crack upon it.

He exerted all his strength in an explosive punch.

This hit came faster than the flying shrapnel.

He activated all the functions in his body, and punched through the armor of this military automata, wrecking the core without mercy, forcefully terminating the functions of this enemy machine–

The shredded springs fell, the wrecked pistons rolling emptily.

He tossed aside the scrap machine, and Marie, standing behind, said to him,

“That’s to be expected of you, Halter. Good job.”

Halter turned around, spotted the girl walking down the stairs, and shrugged,

“That’s just a mere chore. However–”

He stared at Naoto, and wondered,

“You’re able to find out the number of enemies and their locations so accurate..are your ears sonar or something?”

Right–the intel Naoto had picked up was frighteningly precise.

Halter could not tell how Naoto could determine ‘these guys have bad intents on us’, but either way, he did thoroughly pick up on the enemy numbers, locations and weapons.

How much of an advantage can such an ability bring in strategic planning–

But Naoto did not think anything about it as he asked Halter excitedly,

‘Uncle uncle! You’re not using normal military prosthetics, right?”

“Oh? You know that too? That’s right, I look like an ordinary good guy, but my insides won’t lose to anyone, you know? This is the ‘8th Generation’ created by the Breguet Company.”

“What? The 8th generation? Don’t they only have the ‘6th Generation’ on the market now..?”

“This is a prototype more advanced than the next generation that’s to be introduced to the market. IT’s a real high-end product.”

And then, Halter posed to show off his muscles.

“I’m the bodyguard of this Princess, so we used some secret techniques of the Breguet Company through some connections.”

“Wow~! Hey, please detach yourself and show the parts to me–!”

“What disgusting things are you two guys saying!? Let’s go!”

With Marie prompting them, Naoto and Halter kept quiet.

They hurried down the stairs, and quickly arrived at the parking lots.

A black sedan was parked by the entrance.

But the moment she was about to approach the door.

“Don’t move!”

A really loud voice, amplified by the loudspeaker’, boomed throughout the underground parking lots.

Marie widened her eyes as she looked up, and standing in the middle of the path leading to the surface was a stout steel giant—its Electricity Conservation Measures functions removed.

“The VS-08 ‘Grat’–!? An armored soldier? You got to be kidding me!”

Halter murmured, cold sweat trickling down.

That was a humanoid weapon with mechanical clockwork functions, developed by the Vachron family.

It was completely silent, imbedded with silencers, and also had a stealth mode comprised of thermal and optical camouflages. It was an ace used in combat under special environments–and had overwhelming fighting abilities such that many of the light-armor automatas from before could not defeat it even if they banded together.

The cannon was so powerful it could easily blast through the latest combat prosthetic Halter used.

It turned its cannon to Marie’s group in a flowing manner, and then…

–BOOM.

●●●

After hearing the report over the communicator, Limonz gasped.

…What did that imbecile just say!?

He felt sweat seeping out of the hand holding that communicator.

"……C-can you repeat that again?"

"As I said, Marie Bell Breguet and her two escorts resisted greatly, so we had no choice but to shoot them down. Also, an ordinary citizen was involved in this battle–"

"That ordinary citizen does not matter!!"

Limonz clicked his tongue, and continued,

"Who permitted you to kill them!? I said to capture them alive!!!"

"Yes, but–"

This ambiguous answer caused further anxiety in Limonz, and he hissed in an interrogative manner,

"You folks activated our company's Grat, and you still cannot catch a single brat!?"

"…Please pardon me. It is a little inappropriate to think of this target as an ordinary person."

"She is simply a little rascal."

He spat sharply.

He slapped the communicator over and over again, completely seething.

"Right, she is simply a little rascal after all. The most she can do is to fool around with mechanics."

".."

"You killed her, right?…I see, so she is dead."

He licked his lips, and inhaled some air.

"I guess there is nothing of her left after she got caught in the Grat's machine gun fire."

He sounded as if he was a little expectant of something, and the informant gave him a definitive answer.

"…Yes. The corpse took massive damage. It will take us some time to figure out if it's really her–"

"No need for that. Just bury the corpse. We do not need a report. Marie Bell Breguet disappeared during the collapse of the city. We just have to settle it as that."

"…Is that really alright?"

"If news gets out that the princess of the Breguet family got killed by Vachron's men, things will get out of hand. These streets will sink in a few hours anyway."

"Understood."

Once this line was said, the call was ended.

Limonz quietly hung up the phone–and flipped it together with the table.

He widened his eyes, his teeth gritting as he howled in fury.

"Fools! Those useless morons…!"

It would be troublesome if she was really dead.

He wanted to use Marie Bell Breguet as the scapegoat of this incident, to be scorned by the public, and weaken the Breguets.

However, that could only work if she was alive.

The dead could not bear responsibility, and if their daughter was killed, the Breguets would be more aggressive in response. This was the exact opposite of what the Vachrons wanted."

"That filthy whore! She wants to shame us even in death…!?"

–And more importantly,

If she were to die so easily, he would not be able to let her experience much shame.

Limonz wanted to humiliate her.

He wanted to enjoy the moment, how her beautiful face would contort when her pride and dignity was lost.

If not, he would show mercy as a bait during the hearing or to reinstate her, and make that arrogant girl break down in tears, serve him like a cheap prostitute–such a future was not impossible.

But these wretched desires became meaningless the moment she was dead.

He was fuming.

However, he had no choice. He wanted to at least kick at her corpse, he did not have enough time to do so. The anomalies in the city were starting to hasten, and the time to purge was about to occur.

Limonz cursed as he hastened his steps to the helicopter parked on the roof.

●●●

–

"…Is this really okay?"

Halter asked as he switched off the recorder.

Marie smiled cheerfully and nodded,

"Yeah. The Princess of the Breguets got killed by the Vachrons—you really recorded it down, right?"

"To be honest, I feel that this plan is full of flaws…"

Halter stroke his chin as he murmured,

"Well, it's fine. This voice recording shall become actual proof, and no matter what the soldiers say afterward, it will simply be treated as evidence that can't be hidden.

"If Marie dies, those guys' plan will be more or less ruined…that's the logic, but I never thought you would think of faking your own

death.”

Halter sighed, and turned to look behind.

Behind the duo, RyuZU had sliced the armored soldier into bits, piling it in a hill.

The youth–Naoto searched through the heap, and muttered with an annoyed look.

“This is the signature work of one of the 5 Enterprises Vachron… there’s no artistic sense at all.”

“That is correct. However, Master Naoto, if it is something a child created through block stacking, even worthless refuse should be given a suitable amount of reward. For example–you have worked hard.”

The girl standing beside Naoto–RyuZU, whispered scathingly.

Halter watched the duo, and spoke softly,

“…Two humans, one light-armor automata, one armored soldier, and a recon soldier. **All of them got picked up accurately by Naoto’s ‘ears’–**I thought he was mistaken about the armored soldier.”

“If the Vachron Company finds out that this Grat stealth system they’re so proud of was easily seen through, what sort of expressions will the weapons developers there show–hohoho, serves them right♪”

“You look rather happy there.

Halter put down the communicator, stood up, and sighed,

“As an ex-soldier, even I don’t really want to believe this after seeing this. He could even hear a stealth machine underground; how did he do it.”

“But there’s no room to doubt. He’s the real deal.”

Marie narrowed her eyes.

–In fact, it was impossible in theory.

Animals like ‘elephants’ did not listen using their ‘ears’, but through their ‘feet’.

They sense the tremors on the ground their soles, and use it to communicate with their comrades far away. The tremors on the earth, the surface, the air–even voice was a vibration. Those that could cause interference with everything else would create a resonance.

It was impossible for the ‘footsteps’ of those underground–the vibrations of the air to reach the surface. However, the air tremors would cause the walls to shake, and the walls would shake along with the building.

There were animals who can hear a coin drop from several kilometers away.

There exists radars and sonars, which uses the same concept.

However–Marie glanced aside at Naoto.

–Naoto Miura.

He is a ‘human’. Or is supposed to be one.

He was able to carry out a conversation despite wearing noise canceling headphones. If he could detect slight vibrations through his entire body–for example, through the bones or anything like that, such a phenomena could be explained.

But if such a thing was to exist in real life and even made use of till this day, how should she explain this?

Such a phenomena could not be simply explained as ‘a unique skill’.

If it can be described in a single word from the vast knowledge Marie had amassed–it was a ‘superpower’.

In this world that is completely made of gears, this ability, the value of that power, if it were to be measured in a mere person’s terms, there would be much significance in this–

“Marie?”

“–!”

This voice pulled Marie out from her vortex of thoughts.

“Wh-what…?”

“Nothing. I just saw you spacing out there. What are you thinking about? Aren’t we rushing for time?”

Marie watched Naoto staring at her with a strange look, his head tilted.

“–Yeah, that’s right. Sorry.”

She apologized and ceased her thoughts, putting her skepticism aside.

This was not the time to think about such things.

At this moment, the most important thing was to see if this youth was just as RyuZU had said–someone she could entrust her thoughts to. And then…

“…Now then, are you alright, Milady?”

“Yes, Halter. I’ll leave this to you.”

Marie removed the Chronopass dangling at the chest of her coat.

This was the proof of a Meister.

The girl called Marie Bell Breguet once received this medal.

And she,

“–!!”

Threw it into the air.

And Halter fired at it.

The ‘Chromepass’ dancing in the air was shot down by Halter’s accurate bullet.

“–”

And it, it broke apart, scattered into countless gears.

“Right–it doesn’t matter to me at all. What ‘Meister’?”

These words seemed spiteful, but Marie's tone was very refreshed.

This ultra-intricate pocket watch, comprised of 9 gears of all sizes, was reduced to powder.

It was the proof of being one of the best technicians in the world.

Some people even offered their lives to get one.

Outstanding qualities, remarkable talents, unyielding hard work– they gathered all these, bet their careers, and yet there were many technicians who despaired over their failure, as many as the stars in the skies even.

Even Marie, hailed as the jewel of the Breguets, only managed to attain it after so long.

"_"

But it was fine to her either way.

This thing had no use for her current 'objective', and would simply stand in the way of her 'ideals'. It was completely worthless to her.

"Let me do everything I want from now on."

Marie lifted her head, and looked around at everyone.

She clenched her fists, and said with vigor.

"I want to save this city. It doesn't matter what happens later on. Anything that can't help me now isn't no different from shit. I'm going to go my way, and if anyone's going to stop me, I'm going to crush it."

Anyone got any issues!? Marie forcefully asked, and Halter answered back with a laugh.

And then, he covered his mouth and looked down, saying

"Of course it's fine, but Professor Marie, I do think it's unfitting of a posh lady to say the word 'shit'."

"Shut up, you idiot!"

Marie retorted, and placed her hands on her hips.

“The Meister Marie Bell Breguet is dead. I’m now Marie, and I have no responsibilities now. I’m just a little girl.”

She showed a feisty smile.

And then, she turned to Naoto and RyuZU.

“Now then, I’m of **equal standing** as you right now. Get ready to be commanded at any given moment.”

“Ah, er…yeah. I’ll do my best, yeah.”

At that moment, Halter had already checked through quickly if there were any explosives or traps installed in the car. He then unlocked it, and cheerfully said,

“Let’s get on board then. We’re going.”

●●●

Marie sat in the co-driver seat, while Naoto and RyuZU were seated in the back.

Once everyone fastened the seat belts, Halter sneered and stepped on the pedal.

The car rocketed up the slope of the parking lots as it flew up, and Halter turned the pedal around maniacally, causing the car to drift rightwards greatly. Naoto hurriedly grabbed the handle.

The car accelerated as its gravity engine roared.

“–This is terrible.”

Marie murmured as she watched the outside.

No matter how one tried to sugarcoat things, the fact remained that the outside looked deplorable.

Smoke churning in the air, thunderclouds churning, and one could even see a few twisters trampling upon the streets.

Under the effects of the gravity anomaly, there were houses,

rubbish–and humans thrown into the air.

The destruction showed no signs of quelling as it expanded.

It was basically an impactful scene of a disaster in a panic movie, where metals flew about everywhere.

Halter's spinning car continued to race through the streets like this.

They were headed to the center of the city–the massive core tower stretching through the sky and the earth.

The massive core control functions that manipulate all the weather and natural functions in this city.

"Hurry, Halter!"

"Got it!"

There were car accidents seen everywhere along the wide main street, but Halter continued to dart between the gaps, and even accelerated.

Naoto, having removed his headphones to concentrate on his hearing, suddenly whispered,

"Well, just think of it as gibberish from me if you notice it already–two dangerous looking cars are approaching us from the left right now."

"What? The 'military'!?"

"No–that doesn't seem to be the case?"

Naoto shook his head, and two gray cars flew in from the flank.

Two unmanned cars with machine guns mounted on their flat surfaces.

After gliding for quite a while, they switched directions and chased them at an alarming speed.

"–Warning! Warning! Please stop your car!"

One of the cars let out a corrupted voice.

"They're unmanned police patrol cars, and not the pursuers from

the ‘military’. The cars themselves are akin to automata, so they probably gave chase based on their own judgment.”

“Eh? Why’s the police chasing us now?”

Marie growled furiously, and Naoto pondered for a while, before answering,

“I guess–it’s because this car is way beyond the speed limit?”

“You gotta be kidding me!?”

Marie growled as she stamped at the dashboard.

“They still care about speeding at such a moment!? Are all Japanese morons or something!?”

And then, she turned to Halter the driver, and asked,

“Can we shake them off?”

“I’ll be tough. They’re moving faster than us, and the troublesome thing is that they’ll get in our way.”

“Understood.”

Marie undid her seatbelt, turned around, and raised the co-pilot seat. She then began looked around for something, and asked Naoto,

“Naoto, are you sure those are unmanned?”

“Yeah. No doubt about that. What do you want to do?”

“Lower your head and hang on tight.”

“Eh?”

“Master Naoto, please come over to this side.”

RyuZU then pulled Naoto to her side, ostensibly protecting him.

Naoto’s body inadvertently froze up once he heard the pursuing cars approach.

Marie opened the sunroof of the car, and poked her body outside.

Her hands were holding, onto a 25cm long thing–?

“Wha!?”

A sub-machine gun.

She ignored Naoto’s surprise outburst as she fired at the car on the right.

The fully automatic rain of bullets was pelted upon the unmanned patrol car.

However, the scattered bullets bounced off the surface armor of the car, and the car itself was left unscratched.

“…A bulletproof type even. This is getting audacious.”

Marie clicked her tongue in disgust as she thought about how it was a mere patrol car. At this moment, Naoto interrupted,

“Erm, if this is an action movie, I don’t know whether this ordinary citizen A that got innocently involved in this should interrupt…”

“What?”

“That car you attacked just now has two wheels. The front right is moving a little strange, so if you stab–”

Before Naoto could even finish, Marie quickly reassembled the sub-machine gun in her hand.

–Coil Spear.

She raised the weapon that had essentially become a mini-rifle at that instant, and started firing at will.

The bullets bounced off the asphalt, and hit the suspension of the fore right wheel—the tire on the right side was knocked aside, and the car shook greatly.

The car started to spin.

The car lost its balance, and veered greatly to the right, slamming to the other patrol car pursuing them, causing both cars to roll and tumble together, slam into the guardrail, and fell on its side.

“…Your ears are really convenient.”

Marie returned to the co-driver seat and latched on the seat belt as

she marveled.

And Naoto trembled as he asked,

“Is it really a need to know how to shoot if you want to be a Meister…?”

“Don’t use this Princess as the standard.”

Halter laughed, and turned the steering wheel.

The car glided down a wide traffic junction, and raced off at a tremendous speed.

Their current location was between the buildings in the administrative district, the road long and wide.

All they had to do was to pass through this stretch, and they could reach the entrance of the core tower,

“…Things are going well up till now. I thought there’d be at least a checkpoint.”

“It’s necessary to get as much fighting strength when sealing the city. They probably got mobilized elsewhere.”

Halter answered as such to console an uneasy Marie.

Immediately afterwards, Naoto felt a chill tingle up his spine.

But before he could speak up–

“If you excuse me, Master Naoto.”

RyuZU, who had remained quiet till this point, got to action.

She lifted Naoto forcefully while the latter leaning on her. “Ah—woah.” Naoto, upon being buried in RyuZU’s soft breasts, let out a strange sound.

“? What are you—”

Marie turned back to look, and stopped midway through.

For RyuZU’s skirt was fluttering slightly.

Having been well acquainted with RyuZU’s construct, Marie knew

the meaning of such an action.

It was the only ‘weapon’ RyuZU had–the black scythe extend out from underneath the skirt, and swung down at a speed even Halter, a cyborg, could not tell.

And with a snap, the car was severed in half like it was a joke.

The car was nearly sliced in half, into left and right as they glided on the road due to inertia.

“Wooahhh!?”

“What are you doing–!?”

Marie and Halter screamed, and then, there was a boom.

A sharp object flew in between the severed car sections.

–‘that thing’ flew by at supersonic, and even Naoto with his superhuman senses could not sense it.

Soon after, the explosion behind revealed its true identity.

A rocket shell–a high explosive shell with overwhelming firepower.

It flew by the sky.

The car bodies collapsed unstably due to the gales from the explosion. While the car body screeched on the ground, giving off a large amount of sparks, RyuZU embraced Naoto and leapt out of the car.

Though she was carrying only a person, she was practically dancing in the air.

And then, she landed gracefully.

She looked down at Naoto, who blinked in surprise while being in her chest.

“Master Naoto, are you hurt in any way?”

“No, I think they have a bigger problem however…”

Naoto said as he slid down from RyuZU’s arm.

The car, severed in two parts, continued to skid forward due to inertia. The frame got contorted, and the wheel rolled about, facing the sky.

Are those two still alive–the moment Naoto thought of it, a white fabric fallen beside the car–Marie suddenly leaped out, her summer coat slightly stained.

It seemed she managed to leap out at the last moment.

Her beautiful emerald eyes were filled with hostility as she lashed out,

“Ryu–ZU!! Were you trying to kill me!?”

But the being involved, RyuZU, remained surprised,

“That certainly is an extraordinary thing to hear. On a subjective side, it should be seen as be saving those feeble, fleeting lives of yours while I was saving Master Naoto at this same time. Should you not be lowering your heads and thanking me graciously in such a situation?”

“Don’t you know what it means to do things in moderation!?”

Beside her, Halter, who was also all dirtied, stumbled out.

He turned to look behind, stared at the road covered with pitholes, and muttered with a troubled tone,

“…Hey, Marie, instead of worrying about that, those guys are firing on the streets.”

“Ahh, seriously! Does anyone here have a normal working mind or something–!?”

“It seems Master Marie does have some unstable emotional tendencies. A lack of calmness is a sign of infancy, so would you at least show some maturity beyond that infant-like body of yours?”

Marie was left speechless by RyuZU’s words, and lowered her head.

She clenched her fists, trembling, her mouth leaking a voice that sounded as if it came from Hell.

“…It looks like the hatred borne from this ridiculous treatment is allowing me to rip a military automata to shreds.”

“Is that so? Wanna try it out now?”

Marie lifted her head, wanting to rebut at Halter’s teasing, but she was left speechless after seeing what was in front of her.

There was a red light in the middle of the road, approximately 300m away.

–It was an eye. A monoeye was shining from a humongous shadow blocking the path.

This gigantic frame was 6m long, and the circular silhouette was attached to 2 legs through 2 inverse joints. The silhouette was such that one would think of a hare or a short-legged ostrich. Also, there was a 120mm cannon installed on the abdomen.

Marie inadvertently spat out air.

“What now, Milady? Can you use those fists you’re proud of to do something?”

“You said that while knowing this right, Halter!? That’s a Heavy armor automata.”

–Heavy armor automata.

An unmanned automata developed for assault and repression, equipped with a powerful cannon, multiple layers of sturdy armor, and outstanding mobility even on uneven surfaces; due to it being more apt at turning in small angles, such an automata was without a doubt one of the strongest weapons in modern urban warfare.

Also, it was not the only unit appearing in front of them.

Looking far away, there was also a 2nd, 3rd…they could seen 16 such units in their field of vision.

Standing beside the heavy armor automata were many light armor automata and self-propelled artillery, and unmanned helicopters could also be seen in the air. With so many enemy units, Halter could only clench his fist.

“…It looks like we’ve been checkmated? What a bummer; my dream to hit the jackpot in Las Vegas and get a blond model to serve me hasn’t been fulfilled.”

“Please forget about such vulgar thoughts.”

Marie glanced at Halter condescendingly, but she was not looking relaxed after that.

“These unmanned weapons…they’re probably set to taking down anyone who approaches the core tower.”

The reason why they had yet to continue attacking was because the set distances to intercept a moving object like a car was far from the humans that were standing still

“They used an entire battalion’s worth of firepower. Where has the idea of moderation gone to.”

“It’ll be bad if they don’t get any form of damage if they want to make this look like an accident.”

Though they sounded relaxed when talking, an atmosphere of despair began to surround them.

During this time, RyuZU silently stepped forward, and asked,

“Then, am I allowed to assume…that you are going to give up?”

“Well–”

Marie grumbled impatiently.

“We can’t break through them head on. Right now, we need to think of loopholes in their settings and find another route in–”

“If you assume that there is such time, I have no choice but to re-categorize Master Marie from being a ‘small fry’ to being ‘less than a small fry’…”

RyuZU mocked Marie scathingly as she stepped forward elegantly.

“RyuZU? What are you planning to do?”

In response to Naoto’s worried voice, RyuZU merely answered briefly,

“Eliminate.”

And then, she pulled a leg back by half a step.

She glared at the obstacles in front of her, as if they were vile, crude things.

“Since such grotesque, distasteful litter has pointed their guns brazenly upon Master Naoto. They shall be the ‘enemies’ I have to eliminate.”

Upon hearing RyuZU say such assertion, Marie yelled out with apprehension,

“Wa-wait! Those are the latest MAs, you know!?”

“So?”

“What so? You…!”

“If you wish to say an antique from a 1000 years ago is unable to beat the latest weapons.”

RyuZU showed a little fearless smile.

Her golden eyes were staring at the front.

“This is my answer–”

And then, RyuZU looked up.

“You have yet to make progress even after 1000 years, and are only able to create ‘toys’ inferior to me–the weakest of the ‘Sisters’. This is why your minds are unable to graduate beyond the level of mites.”

A sound was ringing.

It was not akin to a gentle sounding singing voice.

In a businesslike, mechanical tone, RyuZU said these words–or to be precise, **she declared.**

“Defining Declaration–Initial Y series, Unit 01, ‘Yourslave’ RyuZU.”

Right, it was a **real declaration.**

“Inherent function–‘Dual Time’…activating sequence, begin.”

It was the assertion of a rebellion.

She declared her intent that from this point onwards–**she would defy the laws of Physics.**

Naoto widened his eyes in shock.

He heard a sound within RyuZU, a sound no ordinary person would be able to hear.

Tik tack, tik tack, tik tack, the sound of the second hand ticking.

The sound was smooth, precise, irregularly, incoherent, yet it was–being warped so beautifully, so naturally.

At the same time, the sound of gears being meshed together could be heard. With the sound of dominoes falling, the shape and color of RyuZU's black dress was changed. Her white skin was revealed, and a thin, clear veil fluttered, forming a tight-fitting crystal-colored wedding veil around that ample body of hers.

At that instant, the golden eyes seemed to change into a blazing ruby.

"–Beginning shift from 1st clock 'Real Time' to 2nd clock 'Imaginary Time'."

The clock disk in front of RyuZU's chest was pressed like a shutter.

After that, the second **clock disk** hidden within showed itself.

The ticking of the second hand that could not be heard before hammered at Naoto's eardrums.

However, the supernatural sound released from RyuZU caused her, her time, and even her existence to transcend beyond the normal laws.

He could not understand.

But his instincts had clearly caught up to the changes in that sound.

"Activating (Chrono Hook)–jumping from real movement to imaginary movement."

RyuZU suddenly turned around.

Naoto gasped.

The crimson eyes facing him were glowing lightly like an avant-garde design, a blaze emerging from within.

RyuZU then spoke in a melodic manner,

“Master Naoto.”

“–Ye-yes?”

“A mere gear that caused me to cease functions for 206 years; the ‘Imaginary Gear’ you repaired for me, Master Naoto, shall be activated. Though it may be a temporal moment for you, it is the same as being several hours on ‘my time plane’.”

–Naoto looked confused, not understanding the meaning behind these words.

RyuZU however closed her eyes in an apologetic manner, and continued to say stoically,

“This function will not cease until the energy from the spring has been used up. However, I shall return back to you, so until then– please spin my spring bac.”

“Ye-Yes.”

“Now then, though it will be 3 hours from my point of view, please pardon me to leave your side.”

And so, RyuZU lifted the hem of her skirt elegantly as she bowed deeply.

And then, she said the name of that function,

“–‘Mute Scream’–”

In that instant, everything ended within Naoto’s cognition.

●●●

Naoto was unable to explain that in order.

For his—no, humans' imperfect vision could only think that everything happened at the same time.

That was really the case.

It felt as if 5 minutes had suddenly jumped by in a film.

It was an unnatural feeling, one where it seemed everything that should have passed by was omitted.

An illogical reality where every single change happened within that instant.

It was even a blasphemous scene that could not be explained.

If one had to start from an obvious beginning–that would be,

The 16 military automatas that were standing in their way at first were shredded in unison.

Their remains fell in piles, and the countless hundreds of light armor automatas were sliced along the necks, torsos and legs, without exception.

The self-propelled artillery, installed at vital positions, were sliced horizontally like they were props used for comedy.

The stealth helicopters, numbering more than 10, had given off some pressure as they dominated the sky, yet their rotary blades were snapped off without a trace, and explosions echoed about before they could even collapse.

That was the beginning, and the end.

The massive battalion of unmanned military that was deployed to seal off the core tower was completely reduced to metal scrap 'in that instant', just as the term implied, falling onto the ground, lying in piles.

"Wh-What's…going on…?"

Halter muttered, looking flabbergasted.

"…Did RyuZU do all of these?"

Naoto said this, and suddenly noticed the comforting weight leaning upon his feet.

He looked down, and found RyuZU leaning there, her face showing the expression of a child coaxed into sleep by her parents,

“R-right, I got to spin her spring–”

Naoto recalled the request behest to him, and hurriedly set her down.

He carried RyuZU on his arms by her slender waist, pulled aside the silver strands of hair, reached for RyuZU’s spring–the little grip hidden cleverly on her forehead, and cautiously spun it around.

On the other hand, Marie shrieked,

“Imaginary…? *Imaginary time–!?”*

Her eyes showed fear that could not be hidden completely,

“H-how’s that possible…time control’s a skill that can’t even be even a rumor here! How’s that possible!?”

“Ah, sorry to interrupt when you’re so agitated, but mind explaining things here?”

I don’t understand. Halter muttered.

And Naoto looked over at Marie in a very intrigued manner as he continued to spin RyuZU’s spring.

Marie gulped.

After taking a few deep breaths, she calmed herself down, and said,

“–Imaginary time is like how time flows in a dream or something like that…for example, well, have you been in the sort of situation where you only slept a few minutes, but that you had a long dream of a few days or something?”

Within dreams, time did not merely pass by.

There existed no continuity and congruence.

The time detected in dreams would hasten and slow down at times, and could skip to the past, the future, at will.

That demonstrated the fact that the concept of ‘time’ was all relative.

The absolute concept time that had flowed from the past to the future at a regular speed–the clock was merely measuring the human continual consciousness against the common time.

The evidence revealing this was by using mathematics, it was proven that this time plane runs perpendicular to the ordinary time plane.

In fact, imaginary numbers did not exist.

Thus–it was called the ‘Imaginary Number’.

–In the face of this long babble from Marie, Naoto said,

“Erm, sorry. I don’t understand the language you’re saying.”

“I’m speaking everything in Japanese, okay!?”

Marie yelled with all her might as she lashed out, and panted furiously.

Beside her, Halter sounded off skeptically.

“…But does such a thing really exist? Sorry, I really don’t know anything.”

I’m just a Gazelle after all. Marie then answered Halter’s grumble,

“…It doesn’t. No, I can’t tell even if it does exist.”

The observation of Imaginary time could only be shown through mathematics, **and that something had to be running in imaginary time** in the first place.

Since human consciousness was something could only flow continuously in a single direction, such a concept could never be understood, let alone observed.

But, well, Naoto tilted his head.

He stopped his hand spinning the spring, and pointed nonchalantly at RyuZU,

“Don’t we have one here?’

“That’s why I say it’s impossible!!”

In his attempt to appease this howling Marie, Halter interrupted and concluded,

“In other words, this Missy here can control imaginary time and move on a different time plane from us, causing such a devastation, is it?”

“No–that’s impossible.”

In response to Halter’s answer, Marie shook her head strongly to deny it.

“It’s impossible. Using plus energy to give minus output…there’s no way to explain other than such an impossible action. That’s probably just a random name and something else altogether–”

“Ah, that’s it, right?”

Naoto suddenly seemed to realize something as he called out.

Marie gave him a skeptical look.

“What? You got a lead?”

“RyuZU did say it right? Her functions stopped because of a certain gear.”

“Ahh, speaking of which…”

“RyuZU broke down back then because of that single gear–”

Naoto said,

“The gear was spinning clockwise, yet it was giving off energy of a counter-clockwise movement.”

“……..Huh?”

After a long silence, Marie raised her eyes and stared at Naoto,

“Wh-What did you just say?”

“Nothing much. It’s as what I said. With such a gear present, as long as it doesn’t matter–”

“How in the world do you fix such a thing!?”

“Eh, erm–is it really weird?”

Marie then butted back, and yelled,

“That’s definitely very weird, right!? There’s no way such a thing is possible in the first place! Are you sick in the head or something!?”

“E-erm…?”

“Think about it normally!! What exactly did you learn in school!?”

“Ah, well…I’ve been sleeping except during practical class.”

Tehee, Naoto stuck his tongue out, and Marie watched him silently.

Sensing that there was a dangerous presence emanating from her, Naoto frantically continued,

“Ah…well, you probably never fixed it because you decided it was supposed to spin in a clockwise direction, right?”

And so, Marie hissed with a frigid expression and tone,

“Do you think it’s possible to throw a ball forward and have it flying at you from the back?”

Upon hearing her ask this, Naoto tilted his head, looking flabbergasted.

“……Ahh, now that you mention it, it is a little weird, right?”

“Right. That’s why–”

Looks like he finally gets it. Just when Marie heaved a sigh of relief, Naoto said,

“But there’s no other choice if the design’s like that, right?”

“D-D-D-DON’T KID AROUND WITH ME ————————————!!!!!!!”

Marie screamed in agony, her hair disheveled.

Her shoulders were trembling,

“All the generations in the 1300 year old Breguet family actually lost to a crazy, unimpressive, perverted bastard…what kind of a joke this this…!?”

Son of a bitch! Marie could not help but grit her teeth.

This imbecile in front of her was truly as he was described–one lacking common sense.

If it was not for this irrational, maddening logic, there was no way they could have repaired this automata. In that case—I see. Marie could truly understand why all the technicians born in the Breguets have failed.

She could understand this, but,

“…I really don’t want to admit this. What’s with this irrational thinking that defies all thinking…?”

Upon hearing Marie moan in anguish, Naoto tilted his head, and said,

“But I’ll say, we shouldn’t be talking about what common sense or impossible things now, right?’

“…What are you trying to say?”

“Because RyuZU’s made by ‘Y’, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“I say–**isn’t a guy who can think of using gears to move an entire planet crazy in the head or something**?”

“_____

“If such a guy made an automata, it’s logical to go beyond common sense here, right?”

“_____

Marie could not answer.

Her tongue was seemingly frozen, unable to move.

'Y'.

The legendary technician whose real name nobody knew of.

He was the designer of this planet–the 'Clockwork Planet', and also RyuZU's creator.

Marie had never doubted his existence before.

She respected him as a technician, and researched hard, hoping to catch up to the skills he left behind.

However,

For the first time, on this day, she found some form of anomaly to him.

That monster created skills that were yet to be surpassed even after a thousand years, designed the blueprint to this planet, and even had control of relative time–imaginary time.

"–This is preposterous. Such a thing is impossible."

But no matter how weird it was, the skills and the object itself was right in front of her. That was why she had no choice but to admit it. As Naoto had said, it was 'that thing'.

…However, the chill she felt at that moment did not vanish.

The feeling of the ground at her feet collapsing did not fade away.

"–"

At that moment,

"……Good morning, Master Naoto."

RyuZU, after having her spring wounded up, was activated again.

Upon seeing her, Marie and Halter inadvertently got into defensive stances.

What their eyes showed as they stared at RyuZU was clear to see–

fear.

That was the most natural reaction a clock technician could do after personally seeing RyuZU the automata display such a ridiculous ability.

Dual time–Mute Scream.

As the words indicated, it was a function that spread death silently.

This automata could destroy anything and everything when time stands still, without any resistance facing it.

–Also, none of them could guarantee that they would not be attacked.

It would be alright if it were simply a weapon,

But RyuZU, an automata, had her own free will, and would not accept their commands.

Also, she was not bound by the ‘ethical code’. That means that she would kill. If there was a need for that, this automata could kill people easily…

With such a reality laid out in front of them, nobody would remain fearless. There would not be a fearless person.

But while RyuZU slowly got up,

“RyuZU.”

Naoto took a deep breath,

“Please be my bride!!!”

He yelled.

●●●

RyuZU gave an immediate reply.

Her voice was as clear as a music box, gentle, melodic.

Her cheeks slightly reddened, her thin smile filled with a little emotion mixed into it.

She said,

“It seems you have fallen head over heels for me, Master Naoto. I suggest you should discern your own standing however.

——……

Upon hearing such a merciless severance, Naoto collapsed on the ground, writhing.

A heartbreaking silence descended upon them.

Marie lifted her head, and stared at Halter,

He too narrowed his hollow eyes and stared back at Marie, who nodded as she stared at his cold, gloomy face. Both of them were thinking the same thing,

What is this guy saying now–

“Naoto…”

Marie sighed as she said to the trembling boy lying on all fours,

“You’re still normal, right–no, I guess that’s impossible already, but are you really alright? What sort of weird thinking process did you have that made you say such a thing…?”

But Naoto shuddered as he answered with a teeny-weeny voice,

“No…that was said on reflex…”

Because–*I think I had no choice after seeing such a thing.*

Naoto thought as he shuddered.

He liked machinery, loved machinery, and was so passionate about machinery he lived for him.

In his life, surrounded by so many gears, RyuZU’s existence was certainly the best thing that happened to him.

As an automata with the best specifications, she had the appearance of a very, very, very cute girl, the sound of the gears spinning like

an angel's singing voice, and he just so happened to be her master. So,

–How can I NOT fall for her?

And that transformation too.

Once he saw this girl, the most precious being to him in the universe, appearing in a wedding dress, he felt, when else am I going to confess other than this moment!

This was not an excuse; it was his soul screaming, driven by his instincts.

–So, because of that

RyuZU's words stabbed through his heart like a fatal blow.

"Master Naoto, I conclude that your mind has been affected by something."

RyuZU then repeated herself,

"–Even if I am a paramount piece of art, an incomparable automata, the concept of marriage is such that both male and female are to be on the same standing. For a marvelous clockwork follower is requested of this, it is an incoherent concept, to put it lightly; to put it clearly, it is an abnormality."

"Don't say it! My life value is already negative!"

Fufufu, Naoto continued to draw circles as he laid on the ground, saying,

"No, erm, I understand…I know that RyuZU's already embarrassed to have me as a master Yes, I was being too idiotic…well, I upgraded you from being the world's greatest treasure to my greatest treasure in my mind…so I lost control. I'll reflect on it deeply and find a hole to bury myself."

Even Marie pitied him slightly as she said to that trembling, anguished back,

"We-well…calm down a little, okay? Though anyone will back away after being proposed to by someone like you. But you see, if you're still alive, something might happen–"

“–Please pardon me, Master Marie.”

For some reason, RyuZU reacted to those words.

She spoke in a serious, threatening tone,

“As a member of humans, the lowest of all organisms with brains beneath that of a mitochondria, you should consider your own inferiority for looking down on my Master Naoto like this.

“Eh—I-I’m standing on your side here. Why am I being told off by you like that!? And those words at the back don’t show that you find it offensive at all!”

“Hey, Missy.”

Halter interrupted, looking surprised as he stroked his chin, saying,

“…Since you wanted to kill our Princess, I guess the ‘ethical law’ doesn’t exist within you at all, but have you not been set to serve your Master Naoto unconditionally?”

RyuZU answered,

“I am ‘Yourslave’–the program ‘set’ within me is merely to follow Master. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yeah, in other words, the program never included you showing affection for your master, right?”

These words dealt a fatal blow, and Naoto was sobbing in agony.

However–

“There seems to be a difference in understanding of those words just now, so I do wish to correct. While is true that I am designed to be a ‘follower’, unconditionally serving my master, my fondness of Master Naoto is of ‘my own free will’. Please do not think that I am a compromising bitch that will open my legs wide upon recognizing my Master.”

“…Free will? Did that automata just say such a term, Halter!?”

Marie exclaimed, but Naoto ignored her as he stopped crying,

RyuZU just said it. She did say it.

‘Fondness’.

…Okay, *calm down, don’t panic*. Naoto told himself.

It was a spider web dangling into Hell, and if he were to tug at it carelessly, he would be betraying Buddha’s mercy.

Naoto slowly got up, and asked tentatively,

“…Maybe…RyuZU, doesn’t…hate me?”

“Me? Hate Master Naoto?”

RyuZU was stunned. However, Naoto did not miss this slip–or rather, he heard it.

Having removed his headphones, he clearly heard it.

There was the slight sound of ‘gears changing’ within reason.

“What reason do I have to hate Master Naoto for putting in so much effort looking for things beyond flaws?”

–In other words, there was no reason for her to either like or hate him.

That probably seemed the case for Marie and Halter. If he were to accept the words at face value, Naoto would have slammed his head into the ground and buried his head.

But he could firmly believe.

Till this point, though RyuZU had been verbally scathing to him, he never felt displeasure for some reason. This probably, perhaps, maybe was not because Naoto had some unique perverted fetish.

…No, though he probably should have admitted it obediently for proposing marriage to RyuZU as a mechanical nerd, this topic should not be heading this way–

“RyuZU, c-can you tell me the reason why? Why you can’t be my ‘bride’?”

“Because I’m Master Naoto’s follower…but as a bride–in other words…a couple.”

RyuZU’s expression remained the same as she answered, elegant

and fluent, and on first glance, there were no changes.

This time, Naoto did not miss out again. Her stare did move around a little.

“This, couple thing, refers to existences standing together on the same plane. In terms of looks, smarts, rationality, and tastes, I am much more outstanding than you, Master Naoto, to a point that it is meaningless to compare. However, you are my master, and I am the servant. If we are to talk about equal standings…I implore you to appraise yourself first.”

Upon hearing those words, Naoto firmly believed it.

He asked,

“Erm–just maybe, RyuZU…do you have an ‘abusive language filter’ or something inside you?”

And so, RyuZU tilted her head slightly.

She squinted her eyes at these words, looking surprised,

“–Abusive language? Me? Master Naoto, for a creature like you at the bottom of the pyramid, someone like me standing at the apex should not need to spend unproductive deliberate effort and words chiding you, and ruin my own character saying such human-like abusive language.”

“““YOU’RE NOT AWARE OF IT!!?”””

Naoto was not the only one exclaiming, as even Marie and Halter’s voices were overlapped.

To adjust his frantic breathing, Naoto placed a hand on his chest.

“C-ca-ca-ca-ca-ca-ca-ca-calm down, Naoto Miura…! You’re now standing at the ultimate crossroads!”

If RyuZU did have a swear filter (temp name), all her words till this point are to be suspected.

He had to find a way to avoid that swear filter (temp name), and

skillfully find a way to ask RyuZU's hidden true thoughts.

–Does RyuZU really like Naoto Miura, or hate him?

In this case, the outcome would be a difference of Heaven and Hell…!!

Naoto said,

"Th-Then, about about this? Nod if yes, and shake your head if no."

Nod. RyuZU nodded.

…Alright, now it looks like I got past this swear filter (temp name) if I stop her from talking.

Once he confirmed this fact, Naoto started to use this cobbled spider web mind of his to get the correct answer, and cautiously chose his question.

He asked,

"Then, first…RyuZU, the 'free will' you talk is a program that makes you obey your master unconditionally?"

Shakes head— RyuZU shook her head.

Right, this is going well. Naoto gave a fist pump in elation.

The answer of the content was satisfactory. In other words, though it is a rule for RyuZU to follow her master, the feelings she may have was not automatic.

And then, but,

"Then…are there any other cases of 'feelings developing due to free will'?"

After a short pause, Naoto utilized a cautious–or rather, timid question.

Since the swear filter (temp name) was a function RyuZU had never recognized, there was a possibility that this free will was interrupted by some occurrence.

If he follow the previous occurrence, he could confirm the condition. Thus, once he deduce whether RyuZU did activate it

subconsciously, if he could determine the logic in that–

However,

Shakes head.

RyuZU merely shook her head.

"–Eh? There's no, previous occurrence?"

She nodded.

"E-erm. In other words, though it never happened before–it's happening to me?"

She nodded

…Naoto was starting to get more confused.

Though Marie did not say it, this useless, unassuming pervert seemed to have pressed some switch.

–S-Speaking of which.

RyuZU's moist eyes were looking around frantically.

Her white cheeks were reddened, her slightly opened lips trembling.

Her back, usually straightened elegantly, seemed unstable as she fidgeted and swayed about.

It seemed—surely it resembled a maiden anxious over her love.

Is this, maybe, but, really…?

It was extremely obvious, for it was different from her usual response of issuing spiteful words.

Perhaps this was the real RyuZU, and that he did not realize this because it was hidden by the words.

…got too check this out no matter what.

"Then, well, I got only 2 things left…to 'confirm'. Is that okay?"

She nodded.

"First–RyuZU, you have feelings for me, not because of a certain

person's design, but of your own will, through your own judgment…is that…right?"

Gently.

She nodded.

Having lost the swear filter at this point, the feelings hidden within were all revealed.

She was short of breath, her hands clasped together with nowhere to go, as if she was begging. Her moist eyes was slightly lowered, but as a 'follower', she could not turn her head away–

Naoto panted.

His mouth was so dry it was unbearable, and his pulse raced, ready to explode.

There was something hot rising from his chest. He was terrified of the girl in front of him; he wanted to shout, run away–but he still stood his ground firmly.

His vision was trembling.

He said the last thing he wanted to confirm.

"–Then, how deep are those feelings…nod an appropriate number of times respective to the affection level."

That could be considered a request instead of a confirmation.

Having understood her master's wish, the automata's face reddened, and she she slowly moved.

1, 2, 3…

Nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod–

Naoto looked up at the sky.

The warm tears were flowing, drenching his face.

Delight filled his body and mind. At this point, the most precious thing to him in this world had shown that she liked him. In the fact of such a fact, what meaning was there to ask whether this was called love, what machines and humans could do?

–Ahh, the world is so beautiful.

It was like a shining ray whitening the dark, night sky.

Like the sun showing its face through the clouds, enlivening all scenery.

Like a baby crawling out from the mother's womb and opening its eyes for the first time.

With such a feeling, Naoto merely looked up and let out a voiceless yell.

I win!

My time has come!

My life's is really bad. To be honest, I'm a loser. I do think of crying before, and I even thought of dying before. Seriously, I might end up falling dead at any given movement.

–Ahh, but it's good to be alive.

Nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod, nod.

A blushing RyuZU seemed to feel that this was inappropriate, and yet continued to nod over and over again; Naoto naturally knelt on his knees in front of her.

He could not hold back his tears, clasp his trembling hands, and raise them high up to high heaven as he lowered his head.

A prayer.

A prayer of thanks.

For the first time since he was born, Naoto truly thanked a certain great existence on this world.

–ahh, really, thank you very much…! I love you—!!!

…And then.

After RyuZU nodded 255 times.

“–I suppose you are happy now?”

She suddenly spoke in an icy tone.

“So you even have an interest in humiliation play. It seems the category slots for my personality classification of Master Naoto is almost insufficient. I suppose I have to designate you in a specialized case as ‘a pervert that goes beyond human boundaries’.”

However, these spiteful words from RyuZU became less sharp due to her thoroughly reddened face.

Naoto wiped his tears away as he showed a cheerful smile, saying,

“Whatever you want. I’m currently enjoying the joys of being alive.”

“Is that so?”

RyuZU nodded.

“If you intend to stay here and enjoy such a delight, such delight will only last your for around 6 hours or so. I suppose it can be considered happiness to spend such times without leaving any regrets behind.

……Huh?

“6 hours? What’s with that?”

Naoto tilted his head, and Marie, who had been speechless till this point, suddenly exclaimed.

“That’s the time left till this city and us go down the gutter, you idiot pervert bastard!”

Upon hearing these words, Naoto stood up, looking stunned as he looked up at the massive tower in front of him.

He recalled the current situation he had forgotten due to his delight, and exclaimed,

“–Woaaaaahhhhh!!! This is bad!? There’s still the repair of the core tower.”

At this moment, RyuZU spoke in an icy tone.

“Yes, have you forgotten? I assumed you have some amazing amount of courage to carry out such a humiliation play with an automata using its limitations in such a situation. It was simply you being narrow minded.”

Naoto sensed that her words were more spiteful than me, and asked tentatively.

“Ah…RyuZU. Are you fuming inside or something?”

“Fuming? Why do I have to show a shaken look because of those insignificant words of yours, Master Naoto?”

“Sorry. No, I’m really sorry. Sorry…but I won’t forget that.”

“–Whatever you wish.”

In the face of such a sweet-sounding banter, Marie screamed,

“Leave the romantic comedy for later! Do you guys really get the current situation?”

She was glaring at Naoto and RyuZU with a look hot enough to melt titanium alloy.

Behind them, Halter let out a deep sigh.

There was a strong look of fatigue appearing between his eyebrows.

“Just spare me already. I’ll never hear the end of it in the other world if we die like this–”

●●●

As they frantically head off to the core tower, a severe doubt crept into Marie’s mind.

–‘Y’.

The clockwork technician who modified the world, and also RyuZU's creator.

The 'Imaginary Gear' was a technique there should not exist.

And the automata that had 'free will', the concept of love implausible before this.

However, this, was too…

"Is he really human…? Speaking of which–does he really exist?"

Nobody answered this question Marie inadvertently let out.

●●●

72,000m underground.

In a wide space filled with gears.

There was an intersection of different paths, each leading to certain areas on the level–the central corridor.

The ceiling was 300m away from where they were, and the edge was 200m away. Though it might be a large place, this room was merely a small part of this entire 24th level.

The remaining space was all filled by the spinning gears controlling the city. The ceiling, walls and even the floor had countless of gears latched upon each other in an inconceivably complicated manner.

This wide place itself was left empty, and other than these four that had entered, nobody else could be seen.

"..Nobody's here. Were they taken away by the 'military'?"

Halter murmured as he picked up a piece of data scattered on the floor.

Though the equipment and date were still present, the technicians were the only ones who disappeared. If they had taken the initiative to evacuate on their own, they would have taken back everything they could use. Thus, their disappearance may not be out of their

own will.

Marie sighed, and nodded,

“It might be alright if that’s the case. At least they’re safe…”

“Hm? No, wait.”

Halter lifted his head.

“Sounds like there are people inside. They’re returning here.”

The moment he said this, a group of people appeared at the passageway leading to the inside of the level.

This group of more than 10 people exclaimed upon noticing them.

“Professor Marie!?”

They called her name and dashed towards her.

They were the elderly staff, all dressed in work clothes. Amongst them was the chief mechanic and the observation team leader.

“Ahh, good thing that you’re alright.”

Chief mechanic Conrad stood forward to speak on behalf of everyone.

Marie widened her eyes, and said,

“I’m alright? What do you mean?”

“Right after you left for the surface, those guys in the ‘military’ came over and told us to leave. We grumbled to them saying that we only came here 2 days ago, and that they’re saying such irresponsible things, but they said vague things like you were arrested, and that they had discussed this through with the ‘Guild’…so we got no choice but to let the young ones evacuate.”

Marie exclaimed in shock,

“Why didn’t you evacuate?”

“”This doesn’t seem like something you would normally ask.”

The chief mechanic stroked the disheveled beard on his chin, and

snorted,

“We still have some work we haven’t done yet, so how can we run away? Besides, aren’t you back now?”

“Speaking of which, I though the surface was already sealed off by those ‘military’ guys. How did you make it in?”

The observation team leader Hannes asked.

Marie gave a troubled, wry smile, and shook her head, saying,

“Ah…We’ll talk about that later. Right now, we don’t have much time. The gravity anomaly on the surface is already very serious. We need to get to work as quickly as possible.”

“…Regarding that.”

Hanners said with a gloomy look.

“You may have just arrived, Professor Marie, but I do apologize for this. Please evacuate as well.”

Marie raised an eyebrow, and said,

“What are you saying!?”

“I’m serious. There has been a chain of anomalies just now.”

The observation team leader lowered his head, showing an anguished look in his eyes.

“We never had much hope in the first place, and now that we’re in this situation…but if you evacuate now, there’s still a very high chance of escaping.”

“You’re still so young, and are already more talented than us. We can’t stand to see you die along with us old fogies.”

The chief mechanic interrupted from the side.

However, Marie stared at the duo harshly.

“I came back to save this city, not to hear the old people cry to me.”

“But…right now, the problem is that we don’t have any hope…”

“Don’t worry. We have a secret weapon.”

“Secret weapon?”

The chief mechanic, the observation team leader, and even the remaining workers all showed surprised looks.

Marie smiled, and nodded,

“Right, let me introduce. This is a citizen–”

Marie turned around, but stopped talking midway through.

In front of her sights and hand was the thing she nearly introduced as the the secret weapon.

“Here…”

Her mouth was twitching.

That thing–Naoto was looking at the ceiling, completely enthralled by it.

The passionate eyes were as radiant as a drug abuser, and his mesmerized raving that occurred over and over again showed that he was obviously very ill in the head.

Also,

“–Ohh, so pretty…”

“……Huh!?”

Marie’s voice never entered his ears as he stumbled forward carelessly.

He stared at the countless machinery installations on the walls and ceiling, giving an infatuated look in his eyes.

“This is so pretty…! This is the first time I’ve seen such a perfect mechanism besides RyuZU’s insides…! This is amazing; who did this, damn it! What kind of god came up with such a design with pretty, attractive, exciting, and amazing mechanical movement…!?”

While he twitched his body about as he said such nonsense without restrain, Marie could only feel a chill and take two steps away from this weird person.

There was silence.

Behind her, a staff member asked in a skeptical tone,

“…Secret weapon?”

“No, that, please wait for a moment, ‘kay?”

“No, erm, just wait a moment, okay?”

It was truly overboard to call him such a moniker, and Marie could only mutter and shake her head.

“Master Naoto.”

It seemed RyuZU too could not bear to watch this as longer as she spoke harshly

“I suppose that is not what we should be concerned with.”

“Ry-RyuZU! You’re finally saying something decent…right! That isn’t–”

Marie was thoroughly moved, her lips curled.

RyuZU however nodded at such a stare, and answered with an elegant tone,

“It does not matter who came up with the blueprint. The most important is the audacious words you said, calling this old, moldy antique as ‘the most beautiful since ‘–I cannot pay exception to hearing that, you know?”

“That’s not the main point either!?”

Marie wailed.

On the other hand, Naoto was flustered, ostensibly struck in a painful area.

“Eh, bu-but? No, erm, I understand very well that you’re amazing, RyuZU, but…”

“Do refrain from the the ‘buts’ and ‘butterscotch’ and the like. When you saw my body on that day and called it ‘really pretty’, were all those words a lie?”

"–Body?"

Marie murmured blankly, and Naoto frantically denied it.

"Th-th-th-that's not the case! How can that be a lie!?"

"And now, you are being allured by such an antique. I request an explanation."

I don't understand what's going on anymore…Marie could not help but cuddle her head.

RyuZU's tone and attitude was the same as before, her face showing a serene smile while her sharp tongue remained present; however, for some reason…her image at this point seemed different.

It seemed as if–she was acting like a woman chiding her boyfriend for ogling another girl.

"No, that's because, you see, this is made a thousand years ago! It's made a thousand years ago, and can still function so perfectly that I can even see all the details! It's amazingly bared out in front of me, and this structure is really pretty–"

"I see. In other words, you are asking for me to 'strip'?"

HUH!? RyuZU ignored Marie's shrill shriek as she placed her hand on her clothing.

"Wa-wai-wai-wai-wait a minute, you! Ho-how can a girl show her skin in front of a group of guys like that–"

"Do not worry. I am an automata, and not a girl. No matter the number of parts, the precision or performance-wise, I am more outstanding than them. However, he has unreasonably called me inferior to such a mass-produced antique, and right now, no matter how he tries to excuse himself through ignorance or folly, he can no longer hope for my forgiveness–"

"Ahh–"

At this moment, Marie understood.

She was referring…to that.

In this critical moment.

In this moment, when the fates of this city, 20 million people, remained in the balance.

This automata was burning with jealousy.

And so, RyuZU started to move her hands and strip her lower body,

“Ahhh——GOODNESS GRACIOUS———-!!!!!!”

Marie snapped.

Her scream echoed everywhere, clattering numerous gears buried in this place.

“THINK OF THE CURRENT SITUATION! WE’RE GOING TO SINK WITH EVERYONE HERE IN ANOTHER FOUR HOURS, YOU KNOW!?”

This yell seemingly showed some effect as both of them kept quietly.

They nodded in unison,

“–Hm, you’re right too.”

“I do sincerely apologize for Master Naoto not comprehending the situation.”

“Eh, me!?”

“Whatever!! That’s enough already!? We have 4–argh, less than 4 hours left!!!”

Marie continued to shout as she pointed at her pocket watch.

“In another 3 hours and 57 minutes, about 20 million because will sink to the bottom with us because of their purge!! Are you going to ask them to die while waiting your afternoon melodrama!?”

…*What happened to the serious atmosphere up till a moment before!?*

Spurred by the emotion of wanting to choke her old self that had believed in this pervert and this automata, her shoulders were heaving up and down as she panted heavily.

Upon seeing that serious fuming look, Naoto blinked and wiped away the nosebleed he had.

“Ah—yeah, sorry. Time to get serious, RyuZU.”

“Yes, Master Naoto. We shall leave these words for later.”

“Please, seriously…”

Marie murmured, and nearly fell limp.

Behind her, chief mechanic Conrad spoke up tentatively,

“Erm, Professor Marie…who are these two…?”

“I know what you’re saying, Chief Mechanic! I already know that!”

Her face seething red with rage and shame, Marie turned her head back. Once she saw the chief mechanic’s utterly stunned look, she continued on with a sobbing tone,

“But please give him some time on my account. No matter whether you can’t or don’t want to believe it…he’s our only hope.”

The chief mechanic stared at Maire sternly.

He had been alive on this world for 50 years. During this time, he had personally witnessed technicians who had fallen weary due to the intensive job, or who had left because they were crushed by their own talents.

Thus, he was even wondering if this girl in front of him has fallen dejected because of overwhelming despair, however–

Marie stared back at the chief mechanic.

Her eyes were a little swollen, red, but they were filled with strength. It was a normal stare with a glint of rationality in them.

The chief mechanic sighed, and nodded gently.

The many doubts he had were not solved, but he could somewhat understand that this girl in front of him could be trusted.

“I understand. I shall trust you at least.”

“Thank you very much.”

Marie’s teary face broke into a smile as she said this.

She looked back.

In front of her, Naoto was already seated down over there.

He was in a cross-legged posture, his back straightened as he took in large deep breathes. He then removed the neon green headphones quietly, and threw them over to RyuZU.

“Help me hold this.”

“Understood.”

RyuZU bowed.

Naoto answered her with a smile, and turned away, remaining silent.

He continued to stare into space, remaining still.

Leaving aside Marie’s group, the staff members they had just met had no idea what Naoto was doing.

One of them spoke in frustration.,

“…!? What exactly is he doing–”

“Be quiet.”

Naoto spoke in a piercing tone

The words were without any dignity or vigor, but the sharpness in it caused the staff member to remain silent.

The heavy silence continued on.

The sound of numerous gears engaged with each other, the squeaking, and the air-ripping sounds rang quietly.

In the midst of this somewhat oppressive atmosphere, Marie wondered.

–How are these sounds being captured by this guy?

He had a hearing ability to hear an anomaly in this 24th level from the surface. With this ability of his anyone would have laughed off, how would this world full of gears appear to him?

She was wondering for some reason.

“_”

Naoto continued remain still and stare into space as he ignored Marie’s thoughts.

Time slowly ticked by.

One could sense the anxiety the staff members had. In around 4 hours, they wold sink together with the city and perish with 20 million lives.

In such a situation, they had to wait about quietly, observing this silence.

Such a pain was the equivalent of a torture.

But whenever an impatient person wanted to speak up or leave–the silver-haired automata standing beside the boy would show them a sharp glance to stop them.

–Don’t talk.

–Don’t move.

The stare filled with such a clear intent nailed the staff members to where they were.

2 minutes, 4 minutes, 6 minutes, what seemed like eternity passed by.

And then–

“—-Got it.”

Naoto muttered.

The tension up till this point was released.

The staff members, bounded by silence till this point, were finally released from this stifling, unsettling atmosphere. Whispers of skepticism started to spread amongst them.

Amongst them, one person, observation team leader Hannes frowned,

“You say you know?”

He spoke with a chilly tone,

“What are you saying? That you wasted precious time? If you’re saying that we’re doomed, we already know that.”

But Naoto did not pick up on the observation team leader’s sarcasm.

It seemed he did not care as he looked into the distance, and declared,

“18 places.”

“What…!?”

In response to Naoto’s incomplete words, Marie interrupted,

“You mean that if we fix those 18 places, we can reset the gravity control to normal?”

“Yes.”

Naoto nodded briefly.

Upon hearing his response, the observation team leader lambasted agitatedly,

“What foolish words are you saying!? How can you know such a thing! Are you saying that you understand the structure here just by sitting there!?”

“Yeah.”

Naoto immediately answered, straight to the point.

The observation team leader again burst into a rage, and was about to lash out at this child in front of him, only to be speechless once he saw Marie run over to him with a blueprint.

“Where are the 18 places.”

Marie laid the blueprint out and asked.

After staring at the ground for a while, Naoto quickly frowned, and shook his head, saying,

“Sorry, it’s too hard for me to read. I’ll tell you the location, so just look at it on my behalf.”

“Okay, leave it to me.”

Marie nodded.

As those two conversed, everyone else present reacted as if they were watching some sort of a horror flick.

The observation team leader asked Marie while the latter had her back turned on him,

“…Professor Marie, are you serious? Are you really going to act according to this boy’s rubbish when he said that he can’t even read the blueprint?”

“Yeah.”

Hannes could not help himself as he yelled,

“Professor Marie! How can someone like you allow yourself to play such a childish game with this person?”

Marie turned back, and said,

“I know you won’t believe me, but right now, we have no other way. Since there’s no other way of dealing with this, I want to bet on a miracle.”

“Professor Marie!”

The observation team leader screamed. He really thought that this girl, who was normally poised and intelligent, may have gone insane. He was filled with anxiety within, but was driven by his sense of duty, trying to make her regain her sanity and leave this place–however,

“–43,985,000,047,245,908–that is the correct number of parts.”

Naoto continued on, his words causing a chilly atmosphere amongst them.

There was silence in the passageway.

Even Marie and Halter, who had personally known of it, had goosebumps on them.

His tone certainly showed that he was not stating a random number.

He really counted them all–no, it sounded as if he was reading off a specifications list.

He merely said it so calmly, in a matter-of-fact manner, without a single doubt.

“There are 4047 parts with anomalies inside there, but 4029 of them aren’t directly related to the current situation–in other words, 18 places. Once you repair those areas, you can control the gravity anomaly.”

–What’s with this guy?

Even the experienced staff members of the ‘Guild’ were speechless.

The chief mechanic and the observation team leader were stunned.

They could understand what Naoto had said, and what he said was clear and precise, but their brains were rejecting such a notion.

Nobody could have known the structure of the core tower in this city.

Even the ‘military’, who had done several hundred years worth of maintenance here, would not have individual path, it would take a massive large scale analysis project, for hundreds of technicians to observe over a few months.

Even they, who hailed themselves as the best in the world, had to spend 2 weeks doing everything flawless in such a critical situation.

No matter how much they struggled–that was the amount of time needed.

But this boy just sat there for 10 minutes before saying this.

…This should not be true.

It should be simple gibberish said out of lip service–but the terrifying thing was that it did not seem to be the case.

It felt as if they had heard of different laws of the universe different from theirs.

Like they had encountered aliens they could not understand.

An unusual, strange, bizarre, intriguing, weird, unique, unexplainable, unreasonable–truth.

Everyone present gulped.

What kind of feeling were they experiencing?

At least, the expressions they showed Naoto was not of respect or condescension.

If one had to classify it–

"–Did you not say that you do not have much time?"

To break this frozen time, RyuZU spoke in a frigid tone.

She stared back at the surprised staff in turn, and spoke sharply,

"You may continue to remain stunned there, but if you are only able to shiver in such a critical situation, would you not agree that your abilities are inferior to that of a cat's?"

Her vicious tongue caused the workers to regain some blaze in their eyes.

They were called first-rate, and did first rate work. After such self-defeat, they were burning up again.

The chief mechanic seemed to have realized something as he sighed hard,

"…Yeah. It's true that we don't have any other way now. Since Professor Marie has said so, I shall believe in her. What he said does not seem to be completely bogus."

"But chief mechanic…!"

The observation team leader continued to complain, but went silent for he did not know how to continue.

He truly understood the difficulty and importance of observation based on his duty, and he had much more difficulty accepting this

reality than anyone else–but he still lost to the reproving look from the chief mechanic and Marie's determined emerald eyes.

He gritted his teeth, seemingly enduring something, and then nodded,

"…I got it. Let's get to work."

The chief mechanic patted him on the shoulder gently, and turned around, saying,

"–Then, give us the instructions, Professor Marie."

●●●

After obtaining as much detailed information from Naoto, Marie made some markings on the blueprint, and marked out the appropriate places based on the estimated areas the observation team had deduced.

She then quickly issued the assignments based on the abilities of the remaining workers.

Once they were done with the immediate arrangements and assignments, all that was left was to do their usual work.

With all sorts of equipment in tow, everyone sprinted off to their work places.

Marie watched their backs, and sighed.

–*There's nothing to worry about now*. They'll finish their work.

"Then, last of all is…RyuZU!"

Hurry here. Marie yelled.

Upon hearing the summon, RyuZU looked over bitterly at Marie.

"What is it? I do not wish to be commanded so nonchalantly by you, Master Marie."

"There's only one place humans can't get inside."

Marie ignored RyuZU's vicious tongue as she continued.

In this short span, she had already understood how to due with the latter.

"We normally need to use some work equipment, but the settings will take too long, so I'm counting on you here. Act according to my instructions without any mistake."

"The only one able to order me–"

"RyuZU, listen to her."

Naoto said.

RyuZU showed a thoroughly disgusted look as she frowned, and nodded unwillingly.

"…Understood. Please give the instructions."

Marie did a quick browsing of the blueprint, watched the meter in her right hand, and quickly did some mental calculations.

Based on the results she got, she issued some instructions to RyuZU.

Turn left 91.2 degrees from where you up, lift your sights by 47.5, and leap 22.3m from here. Over there, turn 180 backwards, move up vertically by 75 degrees, jump up by another 14.25m and land there. After that, move 57cm to the right, find the 17th gear in the 33rd shaft from the right. Down there, at 67 degrees to the bottom right side, there is a gap 0.2mm wide; insert this screwdriver in. There is a gear 0.7 micrometer in diameter skewed there. Set it back it place and make sure 'it doesn't stop spinning'>

–This was no longer an instruction; it was basically a set of precise commands being input.

Once Marie finished her spiel of words in a single breath, RyuZU let out a sigh.

"I understand."

She bowed, turned back smoothly, and leapt.

Naoto widened his eyes as he watched the figure disappear into the left wall of gears.

Marie folded the map, got up, and said,

“Now then, let’s get going. I heard that there are still 3 suspicious areas, so we need to check them out. Halter, carry Naoto and follow me.”

“Alrighty then. If you excuse me.”

Halter followed Marie’s instruction and got to work, reaching his thick arms out to carry Naoto by the armpits.

Naoto was carried up like a cargo crate, and he groaned,

“Am I being used as a tool now…?”

Marie raced forward towards the scene, and Halter followed her, saying,

“We got no choice here. Your body’s too weak. If you wish to be a technician, training your physical abilities; this is a physical job that normally requires overnight work of 2-3 days.”

“Eh?”

Naoto gasped, and sighed. If he had to run using his own feet, he definitely had no self-confidence that he could reach such blazing speed.

Upon seeing Naoto quietly accept himself as being baggage, “However,” Halter continued,

“With that power of yours, you probably won’t have to worry about such details.”

“There’s nothing impressive about me…”

In response to Naoto’s troubled murmuring, Halter concluded adamantly,

“You’re amazing, or rather, your ability is too convenient it’s terrifying. That observation team leader was shivering in a pitiful manner, wondering what he has been doing up till now.”

“–There’s no need for him to be so dejected even after seeing the perverted act this pervert just did.”

Having finally caught up to her, Marie whispered coldly.

Halter knocked his head, and said,

"…Milady, this person here is still the savior from this massive crisis we're facing. It's better not to casually call him a pervert."

"He just sat down there, not talk for 10 minutes, and point out all the anomalies within 3km without a single mistake! What else am I going to call him?"

"…Well, I'm already used to being called a pervert–wait."

Naoto's words caused Marie and Halter to suddenly stop.

As he continued to be carried about, he looked around,

"It's that one, the movement over there, 4th from the right."

He pointed at the bottom.

Marie leaned out from the railing of the passageway to check.

It was a set of gears moving up and down. While the similar parts were continuing their piston actions, the 4th one from the right was slower by 0.5 seconds.

"–Got it. That's the one, right?"

Naoto nodded, but frowned.

The issue in question was about 20m in the air right below them. There was no place for footing, and they could not lower a rope because the other installations were congested, blocking their path.

Naoto looked over to Marie, and asked,

"What now? Go back and get the work equipment?"

"You kidding me? We don't have that time."

After a short answer, Marie removed her coat and threw it aside.

She then leapt over the handrail and flung her body into the gears that continued to spin around.

"Hey–!?"

"It's alright. Don't worry."

While Naoto called out in shock, Halter gently patted him on the shoulder and chuckled,

“Watch closely. This is the skill of a premier Meister.”

–And so, Naoto witnessed a miracle.

Marie silently landed on a nearby shaft, and lowered her body before leaping again.

She glided through the screws, cylinders, wires, springs, gears in a cat-like manner, approaching the problematic place.

She was moving at a terrifying speed.

And without stopping for a single moment.

The spinning machinery was moving so strongly, so sharply, it could have easily shredded a human's body upon contact, but the girl barged in without a single moment of hesitation.

She finally kicked herself off a cylinder, and hooked her foot on a single frame.

She hung herself upside-down over there, and the 4th mechanism was right in front of her.

The slender white legs stretching out from her short pants were really dazzling.

Perhaps due to the amazing momentum just before, the tools fell out from the belt strapped upon her thigh.

Or so it seemed to Naoto.

However, they did not fall out.

Marie had been catching, using and letting go of them, repeating the same process over and over again.

The tools were dancing in the air, as if they were being juggled, staying in limbo.

The screws, wires, gears were all spinning in front of her eyes like an endless dance, before being fitted back into a suitable position.

All these proceeded on at a speed where even after images could be seen.

And in a Topsy-turvy position, to boot.

Naoto was intimidated by this, almost forgetting to breathe as he noticed the happenings in front of him.

He gasped, murmuring,

“Am…azing… this that a Meister…!”

Halter gave a wry grin.

“Don’t try to copy her. An ordinary Meister, they’ll normally use some work machinery or get a scaffold to work.”

“…Then, what’s that about?”

In response to Naoto’s somewhat hoarse question, Halter answered,

“Her expertise may be different from yours, but that Princess there is an outstanding genius too. She didn’t get the title of the youngest Meister in the world for nothing.”

“…Amazing.”

Naoto exclaimed.

That was the apex.

That was the peak.

One may say that of a beautiful feat worthy of the gods, so what would someone describe this elegant performance done with those two hands?

It was a music he had never heard of before.

The music made by humans was filled with discomfort, irregularity, and instability, but this piece of music performed by the person in front of him, Marie was such that even the blood circulation, breathing, and grating between the bones and muscles had reached complete harmony.

“Haha…ahahaha!”

He suddenly burst into laughter.

An explosion of exhilaration rose within his chest.

One day–

Can I perform such a sound?

Marie finished the work within a minute.

But to Naoto, who had etched all these in his mind through the help of his eyes and ears, the time elapsed seemed several dozens, even hundreds of times that.

Marie returned the fallen tools back to the belt as if it was a trick. She looked on calmly, climbed up in a fluid manner just as how she climbed up, and quietly returned to where they were.

She flipped herself over like a circus act, and raised her eyes, saying,

“What are you doing? Hurry to the next one!”

And she sprinted off alone like the wind.

Halter ran after her, and turned to Naoto, giving him a wink.

“–How about it? You can’t help yourself, right?”

●●●

3 hours.

Having finished their work, the staff members returned to the central corridor. Everyone gulped as they waited for the observation team leader to make a report as he watched the device.

“…Brownian motion at normal value. Confirming the list–all clear.”

“Th-This means…”

Marie stammered dryly,

With every staff member looking on, the observation team leader lifted his head and looked away from the meter gauge.

On his intriguingly contorted stare, large beads of tears were trickling down his eyes.

“The repair, work…has succeeded! Unbelievable!”

Even the tone in his report had become shrill.

The dirty faces of the workers were filled with fatigue as they stared at each other silently, giving the ‘is this really over’ looks? They started to worry, wondering if they should be cheering.

But the delight slowly spread amongst them–

They exploded,

“““WE DID IT——-!!!”””

And broke into cheers.

The experienced old staff members broke into cheers that echoed in the passageway, their wrinkled, firm faces soaked in tears as they seemingly forgot their age.

“You got to be kidding me! We actually did it!”

“Hahahaha! Am I seriously not dreaming here!?”

“God…! I’ll go to Church once I get back and donate all my assets!”

Far away from the rambling crowd jumping on the floor, there was a figure.

The bearded man–chief mechanic Conrad.

He approached the boy, Naoto standing slightly away from the buzzing crowd, with the automata standing beside him.

“May I have some of your time?”

He spoke with a sharp, steady tone.

“Heh? Ah…yeah, sure.”

“Thank you.”

He thanked the latter briefly, and said down.

Upon seeing that Naoto looked so nervous, he gave an earnest stare, and lowered his head slightly,

“It’s thanks to you today that we’re able to be saved today. My name is Conrad. What’s yours?”

“Ah…Naoto. Naoto Miura.”

I see. The chief mechanic nodded, and again lowered his head in a proper posture.

“Naoto Miura, I do apologize on behalf of everyone else for the rude remarks they had made. Thanks to you, we, Professor Marie, and more importantly, 20 million lives in this city managed to be saved. I sincerely thank you here.”

Naoto blinked his eyes, looking lost. This was the first time in his life that he was being thanked seriously by such an outstanding adult male.

Feeling somewhat embarrassed, he looked away.

“Ah…no, about that, I just pinpointed where the annoying sounds are coming from. The ones who really completed the repairs are Marie and all the technicians.”

“You don’t have to be humble. There’s no doubt that without your power, this repair work would not be completed.”

The old man's vigorous voice caused Naoto to gulp.

His stare wavered about, unable to remain calm, and his palms were opened and closed for a few times carelessly. His shoulders were slightly puffing as he stared at the old man in front of him.

He spoke tentatively in a trembling voice,

"Erm…"

"Hm?"

He asked,

"Di-Did I manage to help out?"

The chief mechanic smiled.

"No matter how many words I say now, it will be insufficient in expressing my thanks to you."

Unable to endure the emotions within him, Naoto lowered his head,

There was something hot at his eyes. He had an urge to shout rising to his head. He recalled the fear and passion he felt during the conversation with Marie several hours ago, and was trembling all over; the feelings he felt back then is similar to this point, yet a little different. It was hard to distinguish

He could tell that such a feeling was not bad, however,

A soft feeling was pressed upon his palms lying on the ground.

He lifted his head subconsciously, and found RyuZU's face close to his, causing his heart to nearly skip a beat.

The smile she showed seemed to discard the usual venomous remarks she made.

The chief mechanic showed a smile to Naoto,

"Naoto, I have a proposal. Do you wish to enter the Academy?"

Naoto widened his eyes, blinking. The chief mechanic nodded.

"Right. That is the specialized school that allows you to go on a springboard to being a Meister."

“Erm…but I remember only those at the level of Gazelle can enter..”

“That is one of the conditions. However, if two current active Meisters are to recommend, you may be enrolled as a special student. I think the talent you showed today certainly fits that category. I shall write one of the letters, and the other–”

“I can write a recommendation letter too.”

A singing voice came from above, and Naoto lifted his head.

Marie was right in front of his eyes, beaming away.

“It’ll be a real pity to have your talent remain hidden like that, so go to the Academy and receive formal education, Naoto Miura. If you can learn the skills, knowledge a Meister needs–and the learn the personality and character required of you, you’ll probably become the best technician in the world.”

“Marie…did you just deny my personality?”

Naoto narrowed his eyes sharply as he glared back.

Beside him, RyuZU spoke with contempt.

“It seemed you have finally understood reality, but understanding itself is simply not enough, you incompetent humans. Master Naoto is already the best technician amongst humans.”

“Is that so?”

Marie curled her lips mischievously, and closed an eye.

“Don’t blame me for being hard on him here, but if he wants to be called the best technician in the world, the first thing he has to do to convince others that is to at least understand the blueprint, right?”

RyuZU frowned unable to say anything, and Naoto showed a grimace.

At this moment.

A boom and shockwave seemed to echo through the core tower.

Marie lost her balance and fell upon Naoto, “ugh!” causing a weird

sound from below her, but she lifted her head while ignoring him.

“What happened?”

Nobody could answer her call. The sudden jolt caused every person to be flustered, confused.

Amongst them, Halter was the first to recover, and he gave an urgent look as he went to the gauge.

“Hey Marie, this is bad! The altitude’s falling!”

“What did you say?”

The observation team leader leaped to his feet, pushed Halter aside, and checked the gauge.

He immediately widened his eyes, his face looking paler than paper.

“The purge has begun!”

Upon hearing the scream, the commotion in the central corridor got more intense.

The staff members inadvertently started to doubt their eyes, and as the tremor shook in the midst of their shocks, they started to shriek, their faces drained in fear.

“That’s impossible!”

“You got to be kidding me! The city’s anomaly was fixed, right?”

“And more importantly, there’s still an hour till the supposed purge time!”

“Did the military not realize that the issue has been settled?”

“No, they should have checked the situation with the core tower if they’re planning to start a purge!”

“Then what’s going on!”

In the midst of the ruckus, Halter missed out on the moment to panic as he stood still, started, and suddenly seemed to think of something as he hissed,

“–Are those guys planning to deal with this as if it wasn’t repaired?”

A terrifying silence descended upon them.

Everyone present at this place looked speechless.

…This is impossible!

They all doubted their own imaginations, but they had to accept the fact shown by the gauge.

Someone amongst them could be heard sniveling.

In terms of endurance, nobody could possibly outlast these skilled clock technicians, but they were feeling deflated, subjected to the setback. The bigger the delight over repairing this, the more they could not handle the despairing shock of betrayal that backstabbed them, seemingly sending them into the abyss.

‘You got to be kidding…”

Noaot murmured blankly.

It was really unbelievable.

–There’s no way any bastard who would think of such dastardly things and do it can exist.

The cruel thing however was that Naoto realized this. Outside the metropolis, the spinning shafts connecting the city to the outside areas.

He could clearly hear the boom…

…Is this the end?

He fell to his knees, having lost all will. He could sense the term ‘despair’ gradually corrupting his heart. The warmth he just experienced was cooling off, becoming chilly.

After so much effect…

After seeing a few things

–

Immediately after that,

“DON’T MESS AROUND WITH MEEEEEEEEE!!!”

Marie yelled.

“–Right when everything’s about to end!? In this moment!?”

Marie’s bellow echoed through the corridor.

While everyone else was on their knees sobbing, only one of them stood on her feet, adamantly trying to raise the spirits as her emerald eyes glittered.

She ran to the table beside her, and quickly drew out the blueprint.

She then bellowed at the chief mechanic while in such a position.

“Chief mechanic! The gravity control is also left to the city’s control mechanism when this planet was reconstructed, right?”

The chief mechanic, upon being questioned so loudly, nodded in skepticism, and answered,

“Eh…hm, yeah. That’s also developed by gears.”

“Can you specify that place?”

“About that–it should be on this level. But what can we do even if we know?”

Marie ignored the question as she lashed out at RyuZU.

“RyuZU! You know the concept behind the gears creating gravity?”

“….A massive energy is created when powerful kinetic movement and heat is generated by the gears.”

RyuZU answered in a stoic tone.

Marie seemed to be delighted with this answer as she bared her teeth, grinning,

“Thanks–right, the generation of gravity is because of a larger mass and energy, causing the space to be distorted! If we use your ‘Imaginary Gear’ to change the values to negative–we can cause it to spin in reverse, right?”

“…It is possible in theory.”

RyuZU took Marie’s stare and answered cautiously, but lowered her

stare immediately.

“But if my gear is the only one to be used to reverse the gravity field of this entire city, I do not know how long I can last.”

“You can’t estimate?”

“…In the most optimistic situation, I think I can only last for 30 minutes or so.”

“That’s good. As long as we can get that amount of time, we can operate in reverse and reconnect!”

Marie snapped her fingers, and raised the edges of her lips.

But Naoto leaped up and got in between Marie and RyuZU.

“Hey wait. What are you saying? What do you want to do to RyuZU?”

Marie looked straight back at him.

And told him in an affirming manner,

“This city will fall in the purge because gravity exists. This gravity is created by a certain mechanism here and controlled.”

“…And then?”

“Once we interfere with the system, we can create an ‘anti-gravity’ of equal force to the falling city at the bottom, and we can stop the city from falling for the time being. WE’ll then hack into the purge system, reverse everything, and reconnect again.”

Naoto however gave a skeptical look.

“Wait…interfere with the purge system? Why didn’t you do that right from the beginning?”

“Because we couldn’t do it.”

Marie answered Naoto’s doubts simply, and continued,

“We can only do this after what happened just now. I deduced the structure of the route when you verbally explained the layout of this level. As for the detailed mechanism, we’re going to do it in 5 minutes, starting from now.”

The experienced staff members widened their eyes upon hearing Marie's words.

Even the chief mechanic could only stare at Marie incredulously. Even them, first-rate clock technicians, Meisters, had assumed that such a technology could not be replicated.

Naoto exhaled in his attempt to calm himself.

"Understood. Then what's the thing about asking whether RyuZU can hang on?"

"We're going to use the little gear inside RyuZU to connect the control system that manages the massive energy and gravity. If we fail, the gear will shatter immediately, and even if we succeed, it'll be wrecked if we maintain it for long."

"No can do then."

Naoto immediately refused, and turned back to say to RyuZU,

"RyuZU, is it possible to escape now?"

"No."

"If you can run away alone and break through the military's ranks–"

"This is why I say it is impossible. There is never an option for me to run away and abandon you, Master Naoto."

"That means we don't have a choice now!? What do we do!?"

As Naoto growled, RyuZU shook her head, and pointed at Marie,

"No, Master Naoto. As this self-proclaimed genius girl has proposed, you can avoid this calamity by sacrificing me."

The pale-looking observation team leader gulped upon hearing RyuZU's words,

"–! Is that really possible!?'

Naoto turned back,

"Idiot, how's that possible!"

"It is."

RyuZU calmly replied.

The observation team leader raised his eyebrows in frustration.

“What’s going on? If there’s a way to save this city–”

“I said it’s impossible already! Didn’t you hear that we’re sacrificing RyuZU?”

“But–exchanging an automata for 20 million lives–”

“I don’t care whether it’s 20 million or 200 million!! Will you kill that person without hesitation if you need to sacrifice the most important person to you to save this world!? Tell me!!”

Naoto looked dead serious, ready to punch at any given moment. The observation team leader merely shook his head timidly.

“C-calm down, you. Even if you say she’s the most important person to you in the world…sh-she’s still an automata, right?”

“Yeah, she’s an automata? So what?”

Naoto said with a somewhat serious look.

And then, he ignored the speechless observation team leader as he turned back and ordered,

“RyuZU, this is an ‘order’. Evacuate right now.”

“I ‘refuse”>

This automata clearly ‘refused’ her master’s orders.

RyuZU ignored the gang, who remained speechless upon seeing this scene, and continued,

“As long as it is an act that will lead to Master Naoto’s death, I shall refuse it according to my ‘free will’.

“RyuZU.”

Naoto’s forceful tone merely earned back a joking expression from RyuZU.

“How about this? In place for me alone being unable to function, you will get back an automata inferior to me, yet outstanding in her

own way–my little sister AnchoR, and you can also get a body you can play with because I cannot move. As a ‘bonus’, you can also save the lives of 20 million that are no different from the dust. What do you think? Do you not feel that it is barely of equal value?”

“Not at all!”

Naoto answered with a frown, and RyuZU bowed before continuing,

“Then–how about this?”

RyuZu lifted her skirt, and lowered her head.

“Since this useless automata me has proposed something that will threaten Master Naoto’s life, I shall destroy myself as punishment for my own incompetence, so you should be able to make use of my parts effectively…how about that?”

“Wha?”

Naoto was left skeptical about those words–correction, something crept in his mind before those words.

The black scythes rising from under the dress abandoned the concept of time itself.

And they pierced through RyuZU’s own body.

“!!!”

He could not understand.

Or rather, his brain refused to understand the scene happening in front of him.

“If it is you, Master Naoto…you can, definitely do it.”

RyuZU’s smile became a peaceful, ceasing function in front of

Naoto.

The scythes stabbed through her chest was holding up a little gear, as pitch black as the night.

The black gear–'Imaginary Gear'.

"…You're kidding…"

Once this truth had finally sunk into his mind, Naoto yelled hoarsely.

"You got to be kidding me, damn it!! Why did you do such a thing on your own!! I-I didn't come all the way here for this, damn it!!"

Naoto grabbed the 'Imaginary Gear' as he yelled.

…He had no confidence in repairing her.

This situation was different from back then, when she simply could not move; she was not damaged because of the black scythes stabbed into her. Her body was in a slight disarray as she had pulled out an important part to her forcefully, the gear being forced out from her.

But even so—as Naoto said this while reaching out for her, Marie intercepted him.

"Naoto!"

"Let go! I got to hurry and put this back!"

Marie yelled at a completely agitated Naoto,

"Naoto Miura!"

"Didn't you hear me to let go!!"

"–I said to listen to me already!!"

Marie grabbed a growling Naoto by the collar.

She whispered back in response to his savage looking gray eyes,

"Memorize this in that empty head of yours, got it!? I never said a single thing about 'sacrificing RyuZU'. I only talked about the current plan and risks."

“That’s just the same thing, right!?”

“It’s completely different. A risk is just a risk, a simple possibility. It definitely won’t happen like that in reality. I’ll definitely fix up RyuZU personally, so just go along as what I say.”

“…Me too?”

After hearing the skeptical mutter from Naoto, Marie answered powerfully,

“Yeah. We need your help to understand the structure of this level, but for this plan to succeed, we need to understand the entire core tower area. That’s why your ears–your ‘talent’ is a must here.”

Marie knelt down as she pressed her hands on Naoto’s cheeks as the latter remained silent. She continued,

“I believed in you just now, so please believe in me this time too.”

“…”

“It’s a promise. Once you lend me your strength, everyone can be saved. You, RyuZU, this city, I’ll save everyone.”

“…Where’s that confidence coming from?”

“Of course, that’s because–”

Marie paused, and clenched her fist, placing it on her chest

She paced her breathing, inhaled, and shouted,

“Because I’m Marie Bell Breguet!”

Naoto widened his gray eyes.

Marie’s emerald eyes were filled with the glint of self-confidence.

“Please believe in my ability, Naoto Miura! I’m a daughter of the Breguets, the daughter of an a Meister who used to be the best in the world, and the little sister of the current best in the world. I’m the youngest Meister in history, beating that woman’s record!”

“!!!”

“I’m a woman who thinks nothing is impossible!”

A sudden sense of awe suddenly entered Naoto’s chest, and he could not help but be amazed.

She was too dazzling.

Ah damn it, I’m the one without talent here after all. Who’s the genius here? She’s the genius. She’s the real one—real talents are that dazzling after all.

He looked down at his chest.

Despite her functions ceasing–the golden eyes continued to shine at Naoto.

It was a smile devoid of darkness, a smile of trust , no, firm conviction.

Naoto sighed slightly, and remained silent.

–A shockingly amazing genius just told him.

If you can lend me your strength.

–RyuZU handed her gear to him, with absolute faith in him.

If it is you, Master Naoto…you can, definitely do it.

“–If…”

If I really have such a power.

Naoto held onto the ‘Imaginary Gear’ in his hand firmly, and lifted his head.

He stared back at Marie’s blazing emerald eyes, and bit his lifts.

There was a light flicking in those gray eyes.

“…Tell me, Marie.”

He asked.

“What do I have to do?”

●●●

At the outer periphery of the Kyoto Area.

Here was a massive installation supporting a massive structure called the ‘city’.

27 levels high, 50,000m in diameter, 90,000m in depth. This massive cylinder was supported by 4 million shafts connected to each other.

There were also relevant shafts located in the outer periphery, allowing one to disengage the shafts linking the city. This system was originally meant to be a final option in cases of dealing with emergency.

Even if a few gears were lost, the remaining gears of the ‘Clockwork Planet’ could take over for each other and continue the usual operation of maintaining the system. If this were to continue for long, the number of gears that could relieve the workload would continue to decrease, and as the burden on each gear increases, they would deteriorate faster.

Thus, the ‘purge’ would be the final method, and also the world method in decreasing the lifespan of the planet.

However–

This worst method was being implemented at Kyoto’s periphery.

“…Confirming that the 26th level is disengaged.”

Upon hearing the voice of the operator in ‘military clothes’, the hulking man standing in the middle of the control area bellowed with a booming voice.

“Right! Time to disengage the last connection!”

Under his orders, the military technicians of 20 men started to work on the machine connecting to the purge system.

Their faces were equally gloomy.

They knew very well what kind of result their actions would bring about, they knew very well this would end up in a slaughter of 20

million people, and they knew they were hiding the incompetence of the ‘military’.

Even they, who were trained to obediently follow orders as part of the military, could not execute this with pride and dignity.

Upon looking at their faces, the man in the control level–the ‘military’ commander clicked his tongue slightly.

–Goodness, these young men nowadays.

This action was not simply a cover-up, but also to maintain the dignity and authority the ‘military’ had, and also to protect the peace of the people under their charge–the ultimate mission to maintain order.

–They’re being so indecisive over just a mere sacrifice!

The same goes for that little lady of the ‘guild’. Is she so concerned about a city of 20 million people that she never thought of the downside to damaging the credibility of the ‘military’? What kind of a genius is that? A 16 year old brat being a Meister? She definitely made it up there due to relations. What a scumbag.

“–All signals confirmed. Connections complete. Final phase on standby.”

Upon hearing the operator’s voice, the commander lifted his head.

He curled his lips, and gave the order,

“Right. Begin the countdown!”

“Understood. Beginning countdown.–5, 4, 3…”

A stoic, emotionless voice started to count down.

The technicians, who had finished their work before this, watched the gauge dejectedly.

The commander bit his lips, and curled them up slightly.

“2, 1. –Final link, purge!”

The operator exclaimed with a slightly agitated voice.

And then…

“!!”

“!!”

…

“…? What?”

The city did not fall.

There was no response on the gauge, at least. There would normally be a little jolt, but even that did not happen.”

“What’s going on? What happened?”

As the commander growled, the technicians and operator again began to check on their work log and gauge.

After a pause, the operator shouted.

“A gravity anomaly!”

“What!?”

The commander turned his head around, looking surprised.

“It’s an anomaly in the city’s structure. It should be something related to the failure of the purge.”

“Yes, no wait. There’s a massive gravity reaction at the base of the city…impossible! The city’s being pushed up!!”

“…What are you saying?”

“In other words…”

The operator’s voice seemingly swallowed the outcry that happened next,

“Someone may have continued the gravity and obstructed the purge–”

There was silence.

And the commander exploded, lashing out,

“What nonsense is that!? Who did it, and how–”

His eyes, reddened due to rage and agitation, suddenly widened.

With a surprised look, he gritted his teeth.

“Was it that little girl–!?”

●●●

Gravity control system.

It was located on the 289th control block on the 24th level.

It was located deep within the shining gears, a place where it could not be reached easily.

One could see it standing majestically amidst the countless numbers of massive shafts, like an ancient, massive tree standing tall, having went through the vicissitudes of a thousand years.

The clockwork core system was buried deep within the root.

Marie stared at one of the gauges embedded in the base plate, a complicated looking item resembling an animal’s organ. Naoto had the still automata in his arms as he sat down.

There was a gaping hole in the chest of that automata, RyuZU.

The ‘Imaginary Gear’ originally located at her heart was currently placed inside the gravity control system located in front of their eyes.

Naoto calmly whispered,

“–Marie, 3 ‘military’ helicopters are coming to us.”

“Location?”

“35 degrees Northwest, about a distance of 24,906m.”

“Above the 192nd mechanical gear case…it looks like they’re planning to interfere from the connection.”

Marie muttered as shook the thing in her hand slightly.

A ripping boom and 3 explosions rang in Naoto’s ears thereafter.

A cry was heard from the communicator on the wall.

“Professor Marie! We sensed an explosion near the 192nd–!”

“–Any problems there?”

Marie calmly answered.

“No, it’s not obstructing with the work.”

“Please continue the work. The ‘military’s helicopter got taken down due to a slight interference with the air pressure. There’s no problem.”

There was silence on the other side of the communicator.

Naoto ignored her as he continued to report calmly,

“Marie, 24 degrees to the southwest, about 24,589m away.”

“Got it.”

Marie again answered calmly.

And Naoto’s ears again picked up on the explosions that happened far away.

Marie probably sensed the same explosions as she whispered back at the gasping voice from the communicator.

“You heard that?”

“Y-yeah…”

“I’ll take charge of eliminating the interference from the ‘military’, but I’m already at my limit doing this and the gravity control. We’ll leave the connections to you people. I hope that you’ll give your all; every fraction of a second counts here.”

“Understood.”

“Naoto, the circuit on the 5th level can’t seem to connect well. Is there something there?”

“The 5th cylinder that’s currently running can’t be inserted. There’s another system interfering with it 1m above them. If we want to bypass that, we need to turn the 1st cylinder 34 degrees clockwise.”

“Got it. It’s the water reservoir system—okay, connection succeeded.”

The value on the vague was drastically changed, and a new system was shown this time.

Naoto was in charge of ‘observing’.

And Marie was in charge of ‘operating’.

Marie controlled this unknown system of a ‘anti-gravity system’ that they had never known of before this, supporting and balancing this gigantic mass supporting the city. Naoto in turn became her eyes, observing the structure of the core tower and the happenings in the city areas through ‘sounds’.

Naoto waved the conducting wand, and Marie performed the musical instrument.

Their divergent talents were synchronized with each other, meshing together and improving each other.

This last-minute arrangement of session musicians was akin to a complete performance between long-time partners.

It seemed to be a symphony of only two–

“_”

…Halter was flabbergasted as he watched on quietly.

They managed to resist the purge by gaining control of the city’s functions one by one. Through the air pressure controls on the 24th level, they created turbulent airflows, downburst and dust tornados to ‘eliminate’ the ‘military’ that tried to intercept them.

After watching the ‘symphony’ those two made, he only had a single thing on his mind.

“Is this really something humans can do…?”

He had witnessed Marie’s superhuman ‘genius’ several times.

And Naoto’s ‘ability’, one that could be described as a superpower, was certainly startling to him.

But those two worked together to perform this ‘act’.

Was it really a talent humanity had? To master, dominate, control, manipulate a city, let alone the world?

The only thing appearing in his mind was a single alphabet.

The ‘re-creator of the planet’ had achieved an unimaginable, startling accomplishment, to a point of people really doubted his existence.

Nobody knew the name of this man hailed as the greatest genius in human history, and he was only known by an alphabet, Y.

It was overly natural, and nobody had realized the irrationality within it.

But it was a fact that this planet, which had died, was recreated by ordinary humans.

It was not by a conveniently available wizard, nor by a god, but was designed by humans.

At this two, two people managed to control gravity and put the lives of 20 million in their hands.

Was there any hesitation to call them ‘gods’ in this moment?

…Probably, definitely, without a doubt; They had no basis, just belief, just like that.

Should the man who reconstructed this world–‘Initial Y’ be considered to be something like that too?

“–Goodness gracious.”

In the face of the little gods controlling a massive city in their hands, he had the feeling that the **impossibility** of such a thing would be cleanly denied.

Halter could only give a wry smile as he stroked his bald head.

“–Marie, the gear’s not going to hold out for long.”

Naoto’s words caused Marie’s eyelids to shudder.

RyuZU’s ‘Imaginary Gear’, which had been spinning in reverse and giving off a massive energy, seemed to be reaching its limit.

Marie looked away, and slammed the console.

“…Not yet. Another 10 seconds.”

A sharp voice could be heard from the communicator.

“Professor Marie! The main balance is 0.2 degrees off!”

She slammed the console again.

“…! Targeting done! Angle adjustment complete! Connecting circuit!”

“Marie, it’s at its limit!”

“Give me another 6 seconds!. Count down!”

5.

Naoto stood up.

4.

Marie turned her head back.

3.

Their eyes met each others.

2.

The emerald and gray eyes exchanged a message that could not be put into words–

1.

A boom echoed through the core tower.

“Connection succeeded!”

Naoto pulled out the ‘Imaginary Gear’ before those words reached his ears.

He shouted,

“Marie!”

“Hand it to me!”

Marie snatched the gear from Naoto's hand, and sprinted to RyuZU.

The gear–was a little contorted, but since it was still able to generate anti-gravity till the very end, its functioning should be alright.

Marie's hands were moving very quickly.

She corrected the slight tilting, adjusted the frame, and connected the gears, wires and cylinders with a breakneck speed. The gear created an anti-clockwise energy while spinning clockwise, and though the absurd paradoxical mechanism caused the logic and rationality embedded deep within her fingers to wail, she ignored it. It was such a thing, and once she accepted this, she continued with her work, latching the springs and fastening the screws.

After latching on the artificial skin, Marie said.

"Spring!"

"–!!"

Naoto had already reached for RyuZU's screw spring before she even mentioned it.

"–"

In the midst of the silence, the sound of Naoto spinning the spring echoed loudly.

…Is she not going to wake up again?

Such a terrifying anxiety appeared in Naoto's head.

Whenever he spun the spring uneasily, an chilly sense of loss would spread within him.

…After a while which seemed to be an eternity.

"–,ah."

RyuZU opened her eyes.

Her gold topaz eyes were glittering golden, shaking over and over again, blinking.

The eyes slowly moved about, emotion an enigma in them; and so, she looked towards Naoto.

Her angelic lips moved, her clear music box voice ringing.

“Ahh–Master Naoto.”

She smiled.

“You will look really shabby if your already unimpressive face is coupled with those teary swollen eyes.”

Despite her tongue being sharp and venomous, she reached her arm out for Naoto with elegance.

Unlike her spiteful voices, her eyes were teary, her cheeks a tender color.

Naoto too showed a smile as he stroked her hair, and clasped her hand.

Both of them shed tears.

The swear filter within the girl let out a pleasant sound.

Epilogue 00:00

Naoto and RyuZU walked down the path, hand in hand.

Marie and Halter followed them from behind.

The location was Grid Kyoto, 27th level of the core tower, the spiral staircase leading to the innermost area.

This path looked as if it would head further into the underground; it was cramped, and was lacking in light gears lighting the path. It was practically the mouth of a cave leading to hell.

“Is this way correct, RyuZU?”

“Yes. It is.”

Naoto did not show any fear heading into hell, looking pumped up as he strode forward.

There was a simple reason.

It was–

As Naoto hurried down the spiral staircase, his lips started to relax.

“Right in front of us is–RyuZU’s little sister AnchoR! A super high capability automata…!”

He looked ready to monopolize it.

“Master Naoto!”

“Eh? Woah!”

RyuZU suddenly called out and grabbed Naoto’s hand.

But he was unable to stop due to the excessive momentum.

He slipped on his feet–and his body was thrown into space outside the stairs.

“–!!”

Cold sweat was draped all over his body.

The spiral staircase was wrecked midway through, and the front became an actual cave to Hell. If RyuZU had not reached her arm out, Naoto would have fallen into the abyss just now.

“Hey hey, watch out there. You managed to save your life just now.”

Halter joked as he grabbed Naoto by the collar and pulled him up.

“I-I got saved…”

Naoto felt relieved by the firmness below his feet, and spoke doubtfully,

“No, wait a moment. There should be a path here, and RyuZU’s little sister is inside, right? The road’s broken now. What’s going on?”

“…It looks like it collapsed due to the impact from the purge.”

Marie knelt down to check the severed portion of the spiral staircase, and answered,

Upon hearing this, Naoto looked as if the world was going to end,

“Th-Tha…that’s that’s impossible…why, just a little step further—da-damn,
DAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAMMMMMMMMMNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNN
NNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNNII
IIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIITTTTTTTTTTT”

It was a weeping of the soul.

He let out an anguished voice that would have pulled anyone into the abyss, and knelt on the floor.

He was crying.

He was wailing loudly, ignoring his image as he swung his fist at the spiral staircase.

Born within the abyss of darkness inches away from him was an overly powerful anguish, and in the face of it, he felt how puny he was while it continued to torture away at his 16 year old boy’s soul.

Let's yell my throat out.

Destroy every single cell within me for being unable to save her.

The boy who saved 20 million saves felt grave despair over his inability to save a single automata's life, and in his immense guilt, he could not help but wail and weep.

Marie muttered as she watch him in such grief,

"Even if you continue to cry and scream like that…"

"Shut up already! Do you understand this pain I'm suffering? I just lost this ultimate prize of humanity no billions of people can compare to–!"

"Leaving aside that ultimate prize of humanity–!"

Marie was pressing onto her temple,

"But if there was something in front, it should have been moved out already, right?"

"–Eh?"

Naoto stopped crying and lifted his face is surprise.

Marie looked up at the spiral staircase, and said,

"It was already decided that this place is to be purged. If there exists an Initial-Y series here, the military' should have known of its value…it's unlikely that they will just leave her here."

RyuZU nods in approval of Marie's words,

"–Yes. Even to those people who chose this haphazard method of purging this city, and whose intelligence are below that of retards to a point where the latter would feel enraged when compared, she was something they could have never hoped to attain. If they however could not comprehend the value of its existence, I will have to suspect if they truly have brains. I do think that Master Marie's view is very plausible."

Naoto felt skeptical about those words, and asked,

"…Wait, RyuZU, in that case, have you already expected this right from the beginning?"

“Ah, please pardon me, Master Naoto. I am currently wondering if ‘your brain does not exist’.”

Upon seeing RyuZU bow with an unimpressed look, Naoto lowered his shoulders dejectedly.

He collapsed onto the floor, and muttered as he watched the hole leading deep into the planet, hell itself,

“…Wh-what was I doing…taking such a huge risk, putting RyuZU in danger.”

“Not bad though. At least you managed to save 20 million lives.”

“It’s not good at all!”

Naoto glared at Marie vengefully as he yelled,

He recalled the events that transpired on this day.

The day was fine. He had a date with RyuZU, enjoyed her cuteness, and got lashed out by her–it was a heartwarming, blissful memory.

What happened after that? Once he met this crazy, damned trigger-happy girl, he immediately fell from Heaven to Hell. He got fooled by all the rhetoric she made, got caught in the middle of a storm, and after going through many life threatening situations, he ended up in such a pathetic state.

“I just went through all that for no good reason…damn it!”

“Stop complaining. You managed to change the fate of this planet anyway.”

As Naoto let out a deep sigh, Marie cheerfully said.

And then,

“And you helped me make a decision.”

“…Huh?”

Naoto let out a surprised cry.

However, Marie ignored him as she turned to look at the giant man beside her.

“Halter.”

She said.

“Hm?”

“I’m proceeding on.”

As Marie showed a gentle smile, Halter sighed,

“…I won’t stop you, but just a question–is it really alright?”

Marie’s face remained as valiant as before in the face of Halter’s question.

She steadied her feet on the steeps, her hands on her hips as she puffed her chest haughtily, her petite body straightened as she faced Halter.

Her emerald eyes showed only hope and self-belief.

That was a dream.

It was a foolish, nostalgic, yet respectable will, one only children could see.

Halter witnessed the glint in the adamant eyes, and felt envious as he gave a wry smile, and nodded, saying,

“…Alright, I’ll follow you until the very end, Professor Marie.”

Marie nodded in satisfaction, and Naoto, standing below them, tilted his head,

“Anyway, what are you talking about…?”

“It’s my own business–nope, our business.”

Marie looked over at Naoto with a mischievous grin.

“Sorry Naoto, but about the recommendation into the academy, can you pretend that it never happened?”

“Eh?”

Naoto was unable to comprehend her as he blurted out incredulously.

Upon seeing the boy's reaction, she turned way with her lips curled up.

She elegantly strode off, leaving the sight of a small yet wide back as her summer coat was flipped. Halter then followed her from behind.

"Hey, Marie?"

Marie waved her little hand at Naoto without turning back at him.

She cheerfully said,

"–See you next time, Naoto."

●●●

"Master Naoto, this is the 'ahhn' action."

…*How do I explain this current situation?* Naoto inadvertently wondered.

An event happened during lunch break, in a classroom at Tadasu no Mori High School.

The students that brought their own lunch boxes instead of going to the cafeteria were having their meals at their usual places.

And amongst them, Naoto and RyuZU chose to do so in the middle of the classroom.

A week passed since that incident.

The purge, the conspiracy between the 'Military' and the 'Guild', RyuZU's crisis, and her little sister–

Everything reverted back to normal within a week, as if a nightmare was over.

Right, everything was back to normal.

He was already used to seeing the blank eyes and tongue clicking from his classmates.

He was back to his daily life, but to how it was before he met Marie.

If he had to say so–

“Master Naoto, are you not feeling well in your ears? Or is it your eyes? Or mind?”

Naoto closed his eyes the moment he was asked this.

Their tables were put together, and RyuZU opened the handmade lunchboxes she put so much effort in, clung to him in an excessive manner, creating a sickeningly steamy sweet mood as she picked up a side dish, saying,

“Here, say ‘Ah’, Master Naoto.”

–Just explode.

Naoto was unable to endure the silent protesting stares filling his classroom, and could only violently gulp down the side dish that was served to him.

Right, if he had to mention something different, it was that RyuZU attended school in a matter-of-fact manner, and also an unprecedented scandal that had 24 hour coverage.

–A failed ploy to purge Kyoto.

According to the anonymous reports mailed in to many studios, the ‘government’, the ‘military’, and the ‘Meister Guild’ had collided to destroy a city and slaughter 20 million citizens. Once this fact was exposed to the public, the entire world fell into chaos.

This report did not simply expose the relevant information relating to this incident itself; it also revealed a large amount of what was clearly classified information and other shady internal reports.

These included the truth to a historical murder incident, the negotiation details between the government and enterprises, the spy list of those entering a certain country, the ‘military’ secret bases that were never recorded on the map, the illegal weapons they had that goes against the treaties, some members of the ‘guild’ carrying out secret human experimentation, and so on…

The Japanese Prime Minister admitted to the purge the ‘military’

tried to carry out, and took responsibility for it.

“This is undoubtedly a terrorist attack.”

A famous commentator on a certain studio had indicated.

“A purge is certainly a serious matter, but what happened here is way too much.”

And this line caused lots of controversy and scathing criticism.

Also, on a certain morning telecast, foreign correspondent Limonz suddenly fainted and was sent to the hospital after a recording was revealed; it involved him instructing others to kill the young genius clock technician Marie Bell Breguet, 16, and to cover up the incident. His backer, the Vachron Company, was being watched as a result, and was the receiver of some riots and boycotts, resulting in a prolonged downturn for its businesses.

In the entire whirlwind of scandals that swept the world however, only the Breguets managed to remain unscathed–for there was a romantic tale of the Princess of the President being killed while trying to save the city until the very end.

For some reason, the image of that blond, savage smiling girl grinning gleefully entered Naoto’s mind after all these commotion, but–

“…Ah, whatever.”

For Naoto, who was not concerned with the events of the world, these events did not cause him too much concern.

In other words, everything was back to normal, besides having RyuZU with him.

..Though that was the biggest problem.

“Master Naoto, since you are not studying, I suppose your brain is malfunctioning or something–”

And as RyuZU handed him another side dish, Naoto said,

“I say! Can you at least notice the surrounding stares! If stress can kill, I’ll be–”

At this point, he swallowed his words back.

RyuZU was being her usual, showing a regal and relaxed smile.

At that moment, it seemed he realized it. He started to understand RyuZU's 'free will'–the amazing thing about the 'true hearts' automata had.

–You dare not eat when I made this for you, Master Naoto?

"Sorry. I'll finish it up."

"Should you have not done that before? Is this a stress play?"

"No! There's killing stares from everyone in the classroom right now, you know!? Seriously…"

At this moment,

Naoto froze once he spotted something that should not be present.

For some reason, a bald middle-aged man over 2m tall was standing outside the classroom door, peering at the entire classroom with a sharp stare unfitting of someone in the education field.

…What's that?

Everyone stopped their chatter due to this silent pressure.

The man passed through the lintel, and nudged his way to the teaching podium.

He was not a teacher.

To emphasize, he was not Japanese either.

To further emphasize, half of him was not human either.

The man's muscled frame was stuffed in a gray suit, a thick colored pair of sunglasses on his nose. His cynical lips were tightly shut, showing a masculine charm as dangerous as a wild beast.

Also, there was the sound of enhanced cybernetics only Naoto could hear.

The man said,

"Ah, it is sudden, but I am Vainney Halter, currently acting at this class homeroom teacher from now on. I have no interest in brats, so

do away with the love letters and date requests. Any other questions?"

"…Whatcha doing?"

Naoto subconsciously retorted in dialect.

Having foresaw this for some reason, Naoto had his head in his hands; the terrifying matter however was that this series of startling events was not over.

Once he saw that the students became silent after being pressurized, Halter nodded.

He sounded like he was from a certain military battalion as he said,

"Let's make this quick. I'll introduce a new transfer student to everyone—enter."

"Alright."

The sun has arrived. Naoto thought.

A blond white-skinned girl entered the classroom.

Her bright blond hair was tied into two bundles, draped behind her ears. Her large emerald eyes showed vigorous glows upon her tender skin.

The girl was dressed elegantly in the standard uniform as she stood on the podium properly.

She was of a similar build to Naoto, but her overflowing pride and self-confidence made her look a lot taller.

All the students were stunned as they seemingly saw a glorious leader with light shining behind her.

Naoto too could not say anything.

The girl smiled, and cheerfully spoke quickly.

"My name is Maribel Halter. People do say we're alike, but I'm different from a certain person. Just call me Marie if you wish. Please take care of me here."

After saying that, she made an elegant gesture.

And at that moment, the emerald eyes glancing at Naoto flickered like a predator catching sight of its prey.

Of course–no matter how anyone looked at this, this person was Marie Bell Breguet.

Naoto's body could not move as he stared at her blankly.

"……No, seriously, whatcha doing?"

He subconsciously spoke in his native dialect–hereinafter sniped.

●●●

After school, there were 4 people on the roof of this Tadasu no Mori High School, where people hardly gathered.

Due to the red sky separated by the 'Equator Spring', the black silhouette of the core tower looked exceptionally eye-catching under the sunset.

Naoto faced the girl who called herself Maribel Halter as she leaned over the roof's railing and faced the streets of Kyoto, and sighed, saying,

"…So, mind explaining what's going on?"

"Huh? Didn't I say we would meet again?"

"It's impossible to think of that as you transferring to my school here!"

Marie turned around, and grinned,

"You were shocked, right? Weren't you?"

"You're really annoying!!"

Naoto curled his lips and glanced at Marie,

"I'll tell you if you don't know. The public thinks that you were killed."

“Of course I know. I’m the one who leaked it!”

Marie spread her arms wide as she gave a fiendish grin.

“Thanks to that, the entire world’s in complete chaos now! It’s satisfying seeing those useless obstructive people pushing the blame onto each other and running away! Super enjoyable! Heehee♪!”

“Oi, hush up.”

Halter tapped his bald head lightly as he whispered,

“We already expected to expose this incident to the media, but I never thought you just revealed all the information without caring about any confidentiality. Are you the demon or something?”

“Are you an idiot? Why would the dead think about such things?”

“The politicians and the soldiers in the world have their heads chopped off here, you know?”

“What has the fate of those dirt-like guys got to do with me? I did it for such a reason, you know?”

“…Then, what are you aiming for?”

RyuZU stared at Marie suspiciously.

“I have no interest in your actions, Master Marie, but I shall respond with physical revenge if you intend to use Master Naoto for some weird reasons.”

“Huh, that’s not a good way of saying things, right? I just hope that he’ll help me slightly.”

“Help…?”

Naoto murmured, feeling suspicious. Marie then raised a finger.

“It’s simple.”

She said,

“–Just to save the world.”

"……What?"

After a long silence, Naoto raised an eyebrow.

In the midst of her ecstasy, Marie continued,

"I exposed all the masterminds I know of this time, but that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are all sorts of despicable ploys, victims of those covered-up plots, and city anomalies.

"…So?"

"I intend to enter those scenes people won't care about because of politics or plots and repair them all I want, and stop everything just like what happened this time. I won't get any reward and thanks, but that's definitely something worth feeling good over, right?"

Naoto said,

"What's with you? You got some 8th grader syndrome or something?"

"To be precise, it's a rebellious age. I'm going to counter this rotten society."

Rock on. Marie did an air gesture gesture.

Naoto stared at her coldly, and asked,

"…It has nothing to do with me, but what's your reason for transferring into this school?"

"Well, there are many reasons, but the biggest reason is camouflage."

"Camouflage…?"

After seeing Naoto tilt his head, Marie grinned,

"You know what's the perfect stand to chase after your dreams?"

Naoto tilted his head.

"No."

“That’s–being a terrorist!”

Marie continued on, showing a dangerous grin,

“No responsibility, no restrictions. All I need is to proclaim a ridiculous ideal and make noise.”

“…Isn’t that too unreasonable.”

“It’s fine. It’s a kid’s right to talk however I want.”

–Marie Bell Breguet never stated her real thoughts.

And she could never do so.

For it was overly ridiculous. Till this point, it was just a ridiculous, unattainable ideal.

Perhaps she might be able to save this ‘Clockwork Planet’.

Perhaps she might be able to completely repair this planet that was verging between destruction and prolonging.

Perhaps she might be able to replicate the planet’s design that had long disappeared.

Perhaps she might be able to end up on the plane ‘Y’ was on, which nobody else could reach.

She had a feeling that if she worked together with Naoto, she could fulfill this dream–this was the real reason.

“Well, my identity as a student is just a bonus. Since the thing about the academy is gone like a blank paper, I’ll personally teach you as compensation. Be grateful, you know?”

“Hm…well, I’m grateful about that–hey? Wait, I have to follow you?”

“Of course. I’ll use your body well as your lessons fee.”

“There has to be a limit to hard selling right!?”

●●●

…As he watched their banter.

Halter wondered.

Did that princess realize this?

Without a doubt, her decision was basically taking ‘the place of god’.

That genius and the talented certainly had taken a step into that realm.

In the face of such a fact, he could not help but recall the nostalgic dream he had in his youth–but the uncertainly he had was of course…

“Good grief. Looks like I’m advancing in age now…”

He scratched his head, and sighed.

And so, he spoke to the automata who had been watching Naoto and Marie from slightly further away,

“…Hey, Missy, RyuZU.”

“While I do wish to fault you for your fairly familiar attitude, what is it?”

“How much do you know?”

“So even you core of your words are also formed by trash, you patchwork piece of trash. Have you not learned about being specific as to what you are talking about?”

Upon hearing her venomous tongue, Halter gave a wry smile, and asked,

“You said that time that Naoto would definitely do it. Have you already understood everything that happened?”

–Each aspect was overly outstanding.

Marie’s ‘genius’, Naoto ‘superpower’, and RyuZU’s ‘Imaginary Gear’.

This grid would have fallen below the ground if any of them were lacking.

Any slight deviation from the moment the container fell off would not have led to such an outcome.

–More importantly, this automata was the one who lead Naoto to the core tower.

The decisive blow was to hint of ‘AnchoR’s existence, causing Naoto to make up his mind.

But this automata clearly knew that ‘AnchoR’ would not be there.

That should be the case.

“It seems you were mistaken somewhere. I am the ‘Yourslave’–not the one leading the path.”

…In the end, could an automata actually lie?

As Halter narrowed his eyes, wondering this, RyuZU merely showed a little smile,

“But, how about this? Do you know the term–‘the gear of fate’?”

“…”

Stretching through the sky was the power source driving all the gears on this planet.

RyuZU looked up at the ‘equator spring’ that made use of the Moon’s gravitational pull, and continued on.

“This world is built only by gears–in that case, I feel that there is such a gear. My body structure contains nothing coincidental; everything runs on in a necessary manner–this is what I think as an automata.”

–An automata’s philosophy.

Those words rang in Halter’s mind in a half mechanical manner.

He looked forward to the two geniuses (idiots) who could possibly change this world.

“Ah, Naoto. Be happen now. I got some quick news here. There seems to be an anomaly in Tokyo.”

“…Can you tell me why I have to be happy about such a change?”

“Actually, AnchoR might have been moved there already.”

“Alright, open the champagne! It’s party time tonight! Got to prepare for the trip too!”

…Good grief.

Halter gave a wry smile.

“Anyway, no matter how fate leads us, I guess it’s not a bad thing to anticipate a little, right?”

The day the world ends–and reborn. Such a thought raced in his mind.

With feelings of nostalgia and anticipation, Halter rubbed his bald

head as he looked forward to this future with little hope.

—Tick tock, tick tock.

The gears continued to spin.

Regularly, mechanically, inevitably.

And so, they continued to count time as it existed.

Even as clocks stopped, it meant nothing.

Even when damaged, twisted, the wheel of time would continue to spin.

Regularly, mechanically, inevitably.

Tick tock, tick tock—

–They simply exist to continue spinning in the direction they are supposed to.

Afterword

–It all started more than a year ago.

“I say, aren’t mechanical clocks really cool?”

Yuu Kamiya suddenly mentioned this question on Skype, and Tsubaki Himana answered as such,

“…Aren’t you still going through cancer therapy? I’m in college now, and I need to look for a job too, you know?”

Both of us probably don’t have time, Tsubaki said gloomily. But–

“Okay okay. Stop playing that Sk*rim Er* Mod and listen to me.”

This is to be expected of a friendship for more than 10 years. Kamiya continues on with the attitude of having seen through this.

“It’s when I was doing therapy overseas. I so happened to see a mechanical clock in a duty-free shop, and that pamphlet was amazing.

“Oh…but a pocket watch or something like that is really romantic.”

“Humph, I knew you would have such shallow knowledge. I so happened to take a photo of it. Here, I’ll send it to you–watch it!”

Seriously? Tsubaki reluctantly opened the JPEG picture that was sent.

He stopped what he was doing.

—

“Oh…what’s with this mechanical beauty? My crotch’s about to rise (scrolls through)

A mini universe was hidden within.

The delicate gears fill the inside according to precise calculations, and the metal polished as brightly as a mirror gave off a functional luster. Upon seeing the beautiful clockwork function, the romantic circuit located in the right abdomen, which any man will have, starts to ring–

After seeing Tsubaki's reaction, Kamiya nods in a self-conceited manner, and continues,

"So, let's trying doing it for real. A plot."

"Plot?"

"Let's call it–Clockwork Planet! Where clockwork functions turn a dead planet back into a newly made planet!"

Tsubaki thought about it.

…I see, a world constructed with such elegant clockwork functions. A Clockwork Planet floating in the middle of space–now that's a wonderful idea. But, Tsubaki said,

"…It's not nice to say this, but aren't you writing a series called "No Game No Life"?"

If Tsubaki's memory was not mistaken, this friend of his (Kamiya) had quit being a mangaka due to decreased vitality from his cancer treatment. To filled up his wallet, now penniless from the treatment, he had changed professions as a light novelist, and started a debut work–he should be in the midst of a turbulent life where he could not make any snide remarks.

However, Kamiya calmly ignored him and continued,

"I found that this plot doesn't match my style after I tried writing it. It's a rather hard-lined world view after all."

"You really don't care about the consequences."

"–So, do you want to try writing this plot?"

"And you're not listening to me! I'm saying that I'm going to college. I need to study. I need to look for a job–"

"It's fine even if you don't write it now, right? You're graduating next year anyway, so why don't you write after that?"

"Hm…"The plot he was entrusted with was certainly interesting.

Ever since they were acquainted since high school, they exchanged many themes from doujins to commercial products, and they had discussed and worked together on the works released till now. When Kamiya was acting as a mangaka, Tsubaki did help out as an

assistant.

I do wish to see this story take shape. There's time…and I can squeeze some time. But–

"I can try, but if I'm going to write it, can I try writing it in my own style?"

Actually, the script handed to Tsubaki was almost complete.

He simply needed to add some more details to the world view, the characters, the story, and the ending. However, it would not be interesting for him to simply write on like this, and most importantly, there would be no significance of him writing this.

If he had to do it–he first had to be satisfied with it.

However, he merely got back a nonchalant line as a reply.

"Sure. Anything goes as long as it's interesting."

This is to expected of a friendship more than 10 years old.

–Half a year later.

"Erm, Mr Kamiya? Can I bother you for a while?"

"–What? I'm busy making adjustments to the ending of "No Game No Life" volume 2."

This time, Kamiya sounded rather busy in his reply, him being the one unavailable this time.

"Erm, I'm told that I can make changes based on my own interests, but I'm lost…well, do you mind helping me?"

"No actually, I don't really have the time–"

But as the cause of all these, Kamiya, who could not reject others easily, said,

"…I, I understand. Once "No Game No Life" is done again, let's discuss the plot together. We'll use your ideas, correct the paradoxes in it, and I'll let you write in detail here."

"Leave it to me."

–And another half a year later.

“This is the result of what I was entrusted in.”

When Tsubaki handed the draft over with a trembling voice, Kamiya had a hand on his forehead, groaning,

“I say…this is much more interesting than what was corrected, how are you going to end this?”

“That’s why I’m here to discuss this, no?”

…Though there was the urge for a punch to be swung, the thing preventing this was the geographical distance of Kamiya in Saitama and Tsubaki in Kyoto.

“I don’t have to right to say this about anyone, but aren’t you going overboard with dealing problems when they appear?”

“I don’t want to hear that from you, you workaholic in therapy.”

“…Got it. Do–this again with this as base! Reconstruct the plot again, and then you try writing it!”

“Yes sir!”

–And so, a few days later.

“Hey, why did you ignore the story again?”

Kamiya’s scream rang through Skype again, from Saitama to Kyoto.

“It’s more interesting now, isn’t it… (trembling voice)?”

“It’s more interesting now, but how’re you going to end now!?”

“Well, for that, I think I need Master Kamiya’s strength for this, no~? (fidgets)”

Shall I just get to Kyoto and beat this guy up–but that notion was omitted due to time and transport fees issues.

And after a few exchanges–the script was finally completed.

And then–

“I heard that you wrote a new story series with your friend.”

Where did these news leak from?

Here appears Do S, the original editor-in-charge for Kamiya's debut work "No Game No Life" at MF Bunko J, and escaped–correction, swapped over to the newly established Kodansha Light Novel company.

"Let's publish it then (a very radiant smile)"

"Well, we don't have that much time–"

"Let's do our best together then (charmingly irresistible smile)"

–……

And so, this work got published after going through such hoopla and acrobatics.

Kamiya and Tsubaki both thought that there was no prior instance of a work being 'co-written', for normally, the original storyline, writing, and other duties were established before the actual work was to be written.

As for why the authors of this work were added in this one…

"–So, who exactly wrote this?"

The editor asked with a puzzled expression–but,

"As for the issue of who wrote this,"

"We think it's just minor issues."

Both of them answered with cheerful smiles–probably indicating that they had already given up on thinking about it.

"…Well, never mind. We shall leave the illustrations to Kamiya as usual–ah? Huh? Kamiya?"

"He logged out of Skype immediately once he saw the word 'illustrations'."

And so, someone else suddenly appeared on the Skype window–the name is "Shino".

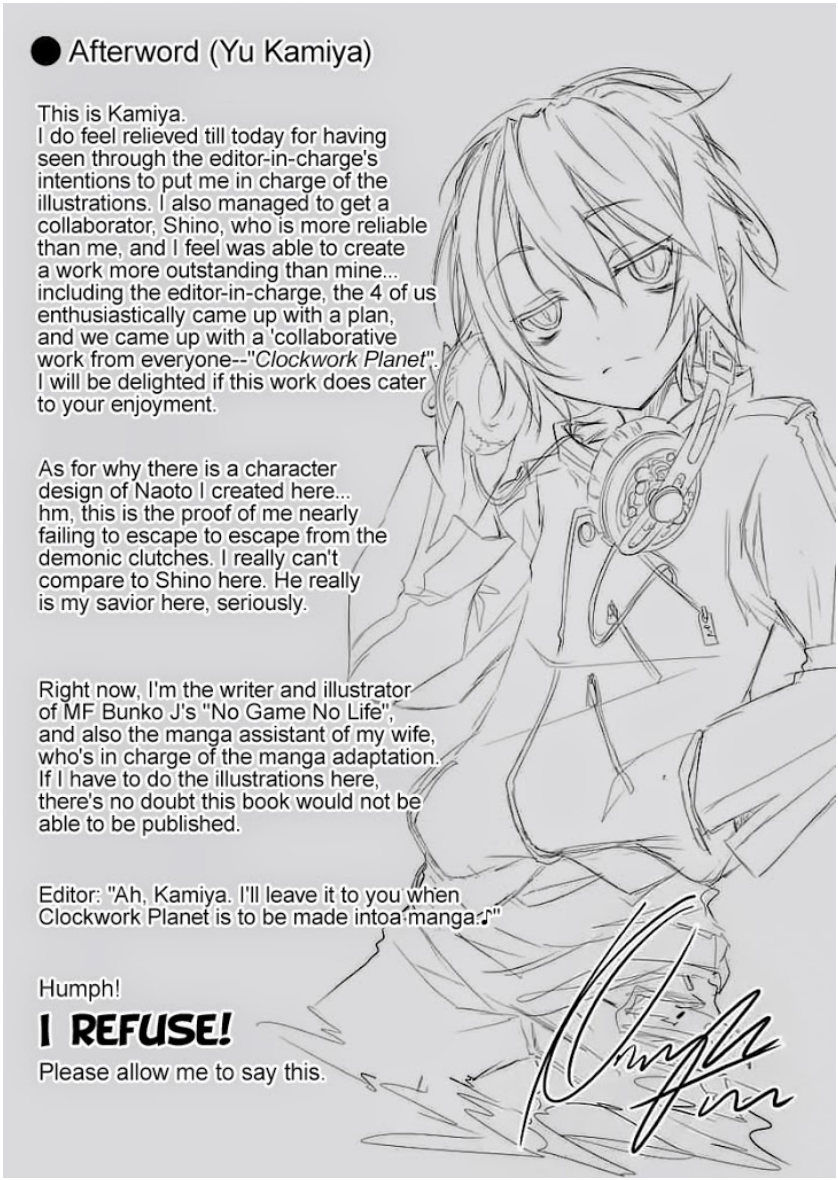
"I heard of 'something very interesting' from Kamiya'."

Shino, without knowing anything, simply asked a question innocently, and Tsubaki firmly believed in this,

He could imagine that the editor-in-charge Do S, on the other side of the screen where he could not see, was showing that smile akin to that of a certain chef.

“It is nice to meet you for the first time, Shino. I heard of your activeness in other areas. You are right in that it is a very important thing. Okay, let us go there to talk.”

Afterword (Yu Kamiya)


Afterword (Yu Kamiya)
This is Kamiya.
I do feel relieved till today for having seen through the editor-in-charge's intentions to put me in charge of the illustrations. I also managed to get a collaborator, Shino, who is more reliable than me, and I feel was able to create a work more outstanding than mine... including the editor-in-charge, the 4 of us enthusiastically came up with a plan, and we came up with a 'collaborative work from everyone--"*Clockwork Planet*". I will be delighted if this work does cater to your enjoyment.
As for why there is a character design of Naoto I created here... hm, this is the proof of me nearly failing to escape to escape from the demonic clutches. I really can't compare to Shino here. He really is my savior here, seriously.
Right now, I'm the writer and illustrator of MF Bunko J's "No Game No Life", and also the manga assistant of my wife, who's in charge of the manga adaptation. If I have to do the illustrations here, there's no doubt this book would not be able to be published.
Editor: "Ah, Kamiya. I'll leave it to you when Clockwork Planet is to be made intoa manga♪"
Humph!
I REFUSE!
Please allow me to say this.

This is Kamiya. I do feel relieved till today for having seen through the editor-in-charge's intentions to put me in charge of the illustrations. I also managed to get a collaborator, Shino, who is more reliable than me, and I feel was able to create a work more outstanding than mine…including the editor-in-charge, the 4 of us

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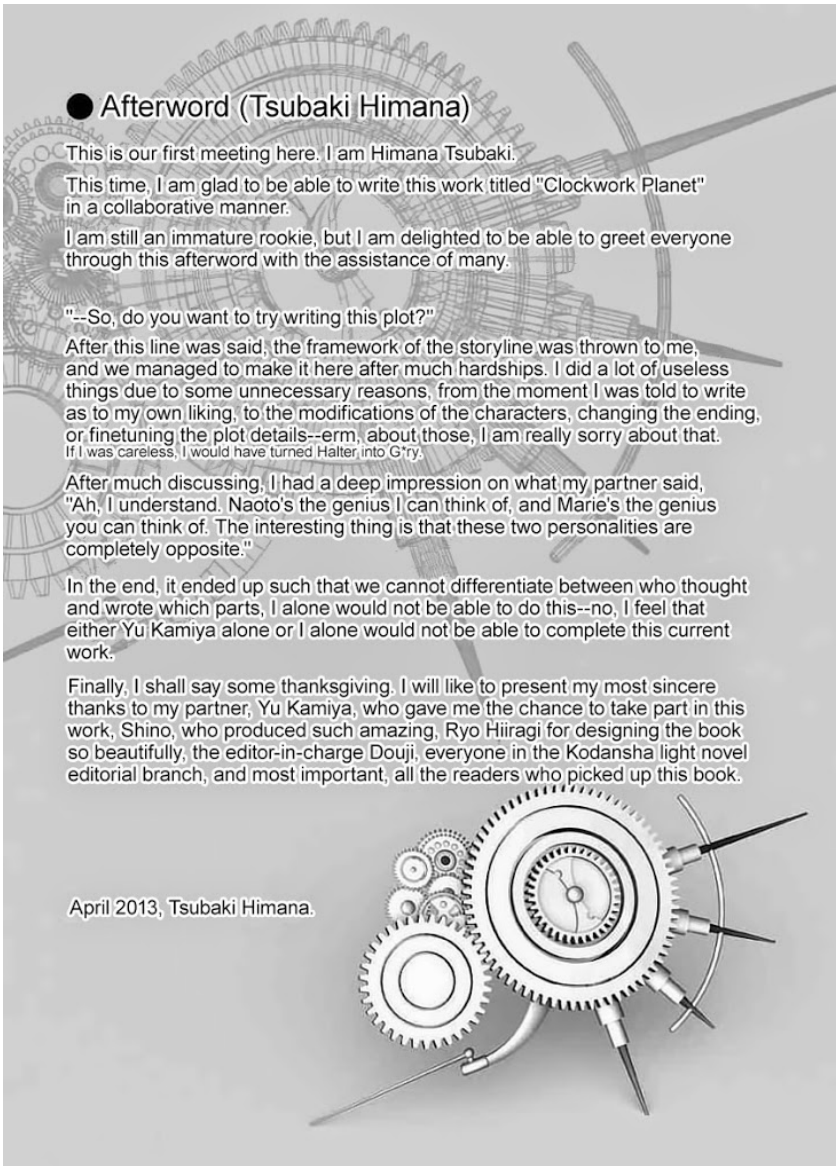
Editor: “Ah, Kamiya. I’ll leave it to you when Clockwork Planet is to be made into a manga.♪”

Humph! **I refuse!**

Please allow me to say this.

Afterword (Tsubaki Himana)


● Afterword (Tsubaki Himana)
This is our first meeting here. I am Himana Tsubaki.
This time, I am glad to be able to write this work titled "Clockwork Planet" in a collaborative manner.
I am still an immature rookie, but I am delighted to be able to greet everyone through this afterword with the assistance of many.
"--So, do you want to try writing this plot?"
After this line was said, the framework of the storyline was thrown to me, and we managed to make it here after much hardships. I did a lot of useless things due to some unnecessary reasons, from the moment I was told to write as to my own liking, to the modifications of the characters, changing the ending, or finetuning the plot details--erm, about those, I am really sorry about that.
If I was careless, I would have turned Halter into G*ry.
After much discussing, I had a deep impression on what my partner said, "Ah, I understand. Naoto's the genius I can think of, and Marie's the genius you can think of. The interesting thing is that these two personalities are completely opposite."
In the end, it ended up such that we cannot differentiate between who thought and wrote which parts, I alone would not be able to do this--no, I feel that either Yu Kamiya alone or I alone would not be able to complete this current work.
Finally, I shall say some thanksgiving. I will like to present my most sincere thanks to my partner, Yu Kamiya, who gave me the chance to take part in this work, Shino, who produced such amazing, Ryo Hiiragi for designing the book so beautifully, the editor-in-charge Douji, everyone in the Kodansha light novel editorial branch, and most important, all the readers who picked up this book.
April 2013, Tsubaki Himana.

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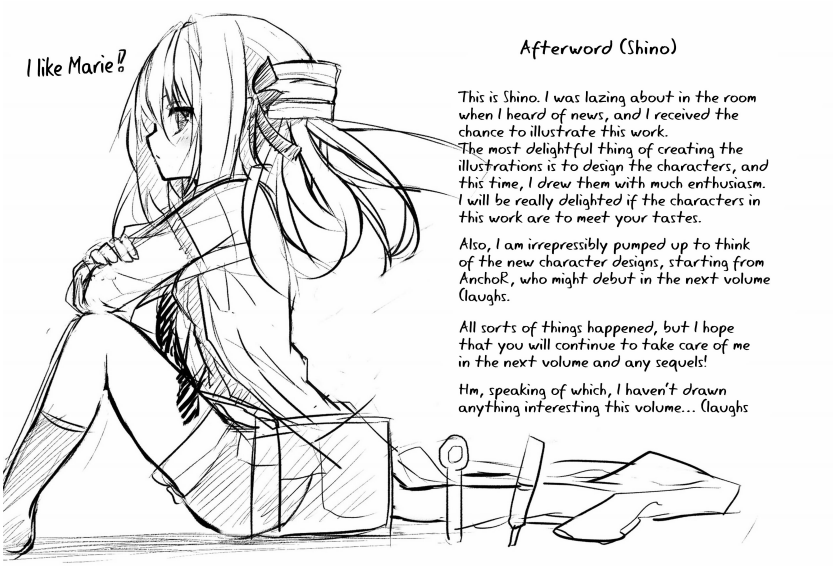
April 2013, Tsubaki Himana.

Afterword (Shino)


I like Marie!!
Afterword (Shino)
This is Shino. I was lazing about in the room when I heard of news, and I received the chance to illustrate this work.
The most delightful thing of creating the illustrations is to design the characters, and this time, I drew them with much enthusiasm. I will be really delighted if the characters in this work are to meet your tastes.
Also, I am irrepressibly pumped up to think of the new character designs, starting from AnchoR, who might debut in the next volume (laughs.
All sorts of things happened, but I hope that you will continue to take care of me in the next volume and any sequels!
Hm, speaking of which, I haven't drawn anything interesting this volume... (laughs

(I like Marie!)

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I tried to draw RyuZU and Marie as cutely as possible, but Naoto's also cute too.

Also, I am irrepressibly pumped up to think of the new character designs, starting from AnchoR, who might debut in the next volume (laughs).

All sorts of things happened, but I hope that you will continue to take care of me in the next volume and any sequels!

Hm, speaking of which, I haven't drawn anything interesting this volume…(laughs)

Clockwork Planet - Volume 01

Written by **Yuu Kamiya** & **Tsubaki Himana**

Illustrated by **Shino**

English Translation by **Teh Ping**

Ebook by Toshiya.